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Cowboy Chris to the Fore;

Scourging the Scourge of the San Juan.

By Wm. West Wilder.



THE HOODED MAN LIFTED ONE HAND WITH A GESTURE THAT IMMEDIATELY SILENCED THE RUFFIAN.

Cowboy Chris to the Fore;

OR,

Scourging the Scourge of the San Juan.

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CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT OF MERRYMAKING.

It was a gala-night at the Robinson Ranch, which was brightly illuminated from end to end and resounding with music and mirth, a dance being in progress. And outside the little half-Mexican towns, a dance in the San Juan Valley was an event—something which drew together such a motley assembly of human beings as is rarely, if ever, seen in any other part of the world.

Everybody came if it was possible to get there. The invitation was general and had been spread over a wide section in that mysterious manner in which such things are heralded in the Wild West. From lip to lip passed the good news, and the result was seen in the remarkable gathering beneath Cy Robinson's roof on the night of the dance.

More than one-half of the throng were cowboys from the surrounding ranches. The others were citizens from the adjacent towns, miners, speculators, ranchmen, Mexicans and even two or three Indians.

Among the ladies were a few ranchers' wives and daughters, and several dark-eyed señoritas were to be seen seductively smiling on the rough but almost over-polite fellows who gathered around them.

Old Cy Robinson and his charming daughter Nina welcomed the guests as they arrived. In this the girl was assisted by a friend and honored visitor at the ranch, Nellie Welland, a girl of nearly her own age and quite as charming, being somewhat more vivacious.

That either of the girls were more than ordinarily pretty any one would be forced to confess, and they represented two distinct types, one being a blonde and the other a brunette. Although they kept well together, this seemed to rob neither of her attractiveness, for each served as a foil for the other without in the least detracting from her own charms.

Nellie Welland's father was also a guest at the ranch, being a large, powerfully-built man with deep black eyes which seemed even darker than they were because of his almost snow-white hair and beard. He was a man who had seen much sorrow in the past, having received a blow which caused an almost utter loss of memory for many years, during which he was known as "Old Rattlebrain," the name being given him on account of his eccentric and sometimes maniacal behavior.

Within the large room set apart for dancing, Rodney Welland stood watching the whirling throng and conversing with the foreman of the Robinson Ranch, a short, weather-beaten, bow-legged cowboy, whose true name was Reuben Randall, but who was commonly known as Round-up Rube.

The contrast between the two men was almost ludicrous as they stood close together, well out of the way of the dancers, being in one corner of the room. Welland was more than six feet tall, while the grizzled cowboy was barely over five. More than one secretly smiled as they glanced at the two.

"A hill-roarin' old time, pard!" grinned Rube, his face being the picture of intense enjoyment, although he was not participating in the dancing. "Reckon they can't beat this in the East, eh? We don't go much on low-necked dresses an' swaller-tailed coats, but we git thar jest the same."

"The people seem to be enjoying themselves, surely," replied Welland, in his deep, heavy voice, which was so expressive of power, and somehow made one think of a lion. And then, as his daughter and Nina Robinson entered the room with their arms around each other's waists, a smile passed over his usually grave face.

"Thar!" nodded the foreman—"thar's er sight wu'th lookin' at! They bain't one bit erlike, but all the same, I don't 'low two better mated gals ever stepped in the Territory. Poorty! Waal, I sh'd snicker!"

The smile on Rodney Welland's face disap-

peared as he saw a gaudily-dressed Mexican staring admiringly at the two girls.

"Who is that person?" he asked.

"Who—whar?"

"Over there; the one who is watching Nellie and Miss Nina."

"Ther critter with ther red jacket as is all kivered with gold buttons an' silver braid—ther Greaser?"

"Yes."

"Waal, they do say thet's ther new foreman o' ther Di'mon' Ranch, as has been bought by er tenderfut frum ther East—er deluded fool w'at's come out hyer ter learn us our business! He's showed his lack o' hoss-sense by puttin' in er Greaser fer foreman, though Pablo Pajario does make er big boast 'bout havin' 'ristocratic Spanish blood in his veins. Oh, ther derved skunks are all erlike, drat 'em!"

Which made it quite apparent the bow-legged cowboy bore no love for "Greasers."

"I don't like the looks of him," confessed Rodney Welland. "The fellow is good-looking enough in his way, but there is something about his eyes I do not like."

"It's thet sneakin' look—you'll see it in ev'ry danged one o' 'em. They never look er man in ther face ef he is lookin' at them. I don't 'low Pablo Pajario's any wuss then any o' 'em; they're all erlike, as I said afore. You can't trust 'em so fur as you kin sling er steer by ther tail!"

"Thet's jest whar this yere tenderfut as hes putt Pablo in fer foreman made er big mistake. I know ther Greaser is er right peert pimp on er hoss ur with er rope, an' I will fess up thet he knows ther cattle business frum eend ter eend, but he hain't ter be trusted. Fu'st thing he knows, Orson Colfax'll wake up some fine mornin' an' fine ther yaller-skin's played him fer er sucker an' vanished in ther night. Then ther tenderfut'll wish he'd paid er white man er leetle more money ter act as foreman an' hed got somebody as he c'd trust."

"Is there never an exception among the Greasers?"

"Ef thar is, I never struck one. Ev'ry white man hates ther varlets, an' it don't do ter putt one ter bossin' over citizens o' ther United States. Thet's whar ther tenderfut rancher hes made another bad break. I know he hes turned off 'most all ther old Di'mon' gang, but er right smart bit o' his men are decent, I reckon, an' ef so, they're goin' ter kick at havin' er yaller-skin bossin' them."

"Ah! here comes our host."

"An' I'm derved ef thet hain't Orson Colfax ther new owner o' ther Di'mon' Ranch, with him!"

Cy Robinson entered the room, accompanied by a small, dapper-appearing man who wore glasses and whose clothes made him a conspicuous figure as he had donned a full dress-suit in great contrast to the rough cowboy and fantastic Mexican apparel seen on all sides. Indeed, under the circumstances, his appearance was little short of laughable, and he looked as much out of place as a booted and spurred cowboy would at a ball in the East. He was rather effeminate in appearance, having small hands and feet and speaking with a lisp and a drawl. It was said he was a college graduate who had inherited a fortune at his father's death.

"An' ther derved fool's kem out hyer ter spend it!" was the contemptuous expression often given utterance by the cowboys of the ranches adjoining Orson Colfax's newly-acquired property.

As soon as his eyes rested on Rube and his gray-bearded companion, Cy Robinson approached them with his lately-arrived guest at his heels.

"Gentlemen," said the bluff old rancher, "I'd like ter make you acquainted. This is Mr. Colfax of the Diamond Ranch; Colfax, this is Mr. Welland, my guest, and this is Rube Randall, my foreman, as white a man as ever roped a steer."

"Delighted 'pon honah," drawled Orson Colfax, bowing very low and giving each of the two a languid hand-shake. "I athure you I am weally delighted!"

With the utmost difficulty the bow-legged cowboy refrained from uttering an exclamation of disgust, and he did give the tenderfoot rancher a grip that made that individual wince and turn red in the face.

"Ob—ah!" he mumbled. "It ith my wing—I have a wing on that hand and it burths when people squeeth the confounded hard. I have not become uthed to the way you thake handth out in thith part of the country."

"We do uverythin' with a vim hyer," asserted

Rube. "Et takes er man ter git erlong in these parts, an' he's gotter hev some snap an' backbone."

"I weally believe you threak the truth, thir—I do, 'pon honah. I am very much pleathed with the countwy, though I mutht confeth the people do theem very wude and—aw—uncultivated."

"Humph!" grunted the bow-legged cowboy. "Don't you kinder 'low thet's speakin' mighty plain right ter our faces?"

"Ob—ah—eh! Prethent company ith alwayth excepted, y'know. I did not mean anything perthonal by my wemark."

"Waal, we don't go fer ter sot ourselves up fer doods, Mister Colfax, but we 'most generally knows our business jest ther same. Ther cattle business is—"

"It ith a gwand bithneth, thir—gwand! And tho thimple! Why, any one can make a thucness of it!"

At this Cy Robinson laughed heartily.

"That's the way it looks at the start, I will warrant, neighbor," he said, laying his hand on the tenderfoot rancher's shoulder, at which familiarity Colfax looked mildly amazed; "but, wait till you have been at it a while and see if you do not sing a different tune. You have not yet learned anything of the privations, disappointments and disasters of ranching."

"I have heard a gweat deal about thothe thingth, but by gwathuth! I am half-inclined to believe it ith all a thcare just to keep people fwom going into the buitneth."

"Wait till we have a bad winter or the cattle-lifters run off half your stock."

"The cattle-lifterth?"

"Yes; cattle-thieves. And that makes me think: they do say Black Phenix, the old scourge of the San Juan, is back into this section, though I am more than half inclined to believe there is no truth in the report."

"Thet devil back hyer!" exclaimed Rube. "Ef thet's so, thar's trouble erhead an' er heap o' it. He's ther wu'st cattle-pirate thet ever cursed ther Southwest! But I thort ther critter wuz dead?"

"He has been reported dead many times," came gravely from Cy Robinson's lips, "but like the fabled bird whose name he bears, he always seems to rise unharmed from from his ashes. He will not stay dead, that is the trouble."

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING CRY.

THE music consisted of such as could be obtained from a violin and banjo, the player of the latter instrument being a coal-black negro of uncertain age. His name was Pete, and he was Nellie Welland's faithful attendant, having been a servant of her family when she lived in the South. His dark face was almost continually expressive of jolly good-humor, for he had a habit of showing his "ivories" by a broad grin.

After one of the dances was over, it was announced that the darky would favor the company with a song.

"Jes' yo' critters keep kine ob still an' I'll gib yo' er classucal imposition from one ob de ole mars'ers," he observed, softly striking the strings of his instrument. "Dis hymn-chune had been sung befo' all de crown-heads ob Yurup, an' it hab raised er gre't furrer whar-ebber it bat bin heard. Yo' gemmans will please put on yo' globes, fo' yo' 's suah ter git so kersited dat yo'll blistah yo' han's wid de clappin' w'en I's frough."

He kept them waiting impatiently while he made sure his banjo was perfectly in tune.

"All reddy fo' de inflicshun," he finally cried. "Eb'rybuddy hab primisc'us permission ter stop up dey're ears. De name ob dis song am 'Dey Like It.' Let'er went!"

"We find ermong de bes' ob men
Dey sometime take a smile,
Dey crooks dey're elbows now an den—
Dey're jints hab need ob 'ile;
De temp'rance cranks hab holler canes
Dat holds erbout a quart,
It sometime fuddles up dey're brains,
An' den dey're of'en caught."

"But dey like it, dey like it,
Dey like it now an' den;
It's drefful queer, for dough it's dear,
De berry bes' ob men
Dey like it."

"An' dere's de men dat makes our laws,
In Congress cut de swell,
Dey drink soft stuff, but wink because—
Yo' bet I'll nebbet tell!
Dey go dere lean, but git so fat
Dey skeerce kin wag erbout;
Dey're head's too big to fit a hat
W'en fo' de night dey're out."

' But dey like it, dey like it,
Dey like it now an' den;
It's drefful queer, for dough it's dear,
De berry bes' ob men
Dey like it."

Pete's song indeed created a "furrer" of applause, the delighted cowboys clapping their hands and shouting till the darky was forced to respond, in true minstrel style, with another verse:

"De ladies now I'll mention dem;
If slighted dey won't like it;
An' if I say dey fools de men,
I's mighty shore ter strike it;
We squeeze dey're han's an' smile an' bow—
Dey ax us will wedrop it,—
An' if dey're kissed dey raise a row
An' say we bettah stop it."

"But dey like it, dey like it,
Dey like it now an' den;
It's drefful queer, for it is clear
De berry best of dem
Dey like it."

This was received by a genuine cowboy yell that almost raised the roof, the rough fellows fairly forgetting where they were in their enthusiasm and excitement. Pete was unanimously voted "a dandy," but refused to sing any more just then.

"Jes' yo' wait tell bimeby, folkses," he said. "'Tain't bes' to sp'ile de impression I hab made. I 'clare to goodness I's 'stounded to fink yo' like it!"

"By smoke!" exclaimed Cy Robinson, slapping his thigh. "That nigger's a jewel! I believe he would be a valuable fellow to have around the place to keep the boys in good spirits. I don't know but I will have to see if I can't hire him to stop with me."

"I am athrowned!" drawled Orson Colfax—"I weally am! Why, that thong wath weal vulgah! I thoulden't think you would allow anything of the kind, Mistah Wobinson."

Round-up Rube gave a snort of disgust and turned away to keep from freely expressing his opinion of the tenderfoot ranchman. Cy Robinson looked a trifle surprised, but forced a laugh.

"It is plain you do not like it, Colfax."

"I like thomething more wefined, thir."

"I am afraid your taste is a little too fine-grained for this part of the country," observed Rodney Welland. "I am free to say that I did not notice anything objectionable in the song."

"Then we will not discuth the mattah," returned the tenderfoot, with dignity.

At this moment, arm in arm, two young men approached the little group, the eyes of Rodney Welland and Cy Robinson lighting up as they saw them.

"Ah! here are the boys," came from the rancher's lips. "Two fine, manly-appearing lads, eh, Welland?"

"And as manly as they appear," bowed the gray-bearded man.

"Now you're shoutin!" put in the bow-legged cowboy. "It jest dux one's eyes good ter look at 'em arter hevin' looked at some other things," with a side-glance at Orson Colfax.

Shoulder to shoulder, about six feet in height and twenty-one years of age, the two fellows were perfect specimens of physical beauty, such men as one naturally turns to look after a second time.

One of them, Christopher Comstock, familiarly called "Cowboy Chris," was an employee on the Robinson Ranch, and a general favorite, although he had come there a tenderfoot. By his determination, undaunted courage and manly qualities he had won his way in a wonderful manner, till, young though he was, he was known as "the Man of Caliber."

The other, Fred Anthrop, was one of Chris's old schoolmates, and was the accepted suitor for the hand of Rodney Welland's fair daughter. Chance had brought him to the Robinson Ranch, where he was one of the honored guests.

The young men were introduced to Orson Colfax, and received a half-hearted hand-shake from the new owner of the Diamond Ranch.

"Are you enjoying yourselves, you young rascals?" demanded bluff old Cy Robinson.

"Are you flirting to your heart's content?"

"I am doing my part of the flirting," laughingly replied Chris; "but I believe Fred is in the sulks, and your foreman, Mr. Colfax, is the cause of it."

"How ith that?"

Fred tried to silence his friend, but the young cowboy would not heed.

"The yellow rascal has obtained the first dance of the evening with Miss Welland, and

Fred has been waiting for that very thing all this time."

"Don't let that give you the blues, my boy," advised Rodney Welland. "I would not be beaten in that way. Just capture the prettiest senorita in the room, and see how Nell likes that."

"Oh, Chris will talk!" laughed Fred. "My being in the sulks is all in his mind."

"Still he acknowledged he did not like to be beaten by a Greaser."

"Who in blazes duzi!" blurted Round-up Rube. "Ding-blast ther critters, say I!"

"It is a singular thing you should hire one for a foreman, Colfax," said Cy Robinson, gravely. "They do not run well with white men, and I am afraid you will find you have made a mistake. I hope you will not take offense at my plain talk, for I assure you, it is intended for your good."

The tenderfoot rancher drew himself up stiffly.

"I prethume I know my bithneth, thir!" he said, with dignity. "I hired the man becauthe he could be obtained much cheaper than any one elthe who could fill the plathe. I have come out here to thow you people that there can be a great deal more money made in the cattle bithneth than you are making. My father made bith money by economy, it alwayth being bith plan to purchathe a two-dollah article for a dollah when he could do tho. I am thimply following in bith footsthepths."

Seeing it was impossible to convince the man of his error by argument, Robinson quickly changed the subject.

Another dance was announced, and the two young men turned away. Fred was able to obtain Nina Robinson for a partner, and Chris secured a really pretty little Mexican maid.

During the progress of the dance, Fred's eyes turned many times toward the beautiful girl who had promised to become his wife. With a pang of jealousy, he saw how merry she appeared, and how gracefully her fancifully-attired partner danced.

"They make a handsome couple, don't they?" maliciously whispered the rancher's daughter, as she detected Fred's eyes following Pablo Pajario and Nell. "Isn't he a really nice-looking fellow for a Mexican?"

"I do not like his looks," was the short reply, although Fred did not mean to be rude.

Nina broke into a suppressed laugh that brought a flush of hot color to the young man's face.

"I am afraid you are jealous, Mr. Anthrop. You show it plainly. Let me warn you not to allow Nellie to see it, for she will be sure to tease the life out of you. You have no cause to fear Pablo Pajario as a rival when Chris Comstock failed to win the one you covet. Compare the two! There is Chris now. Look at that tall, manly figure, and then take a look at the foreman of the Diamond Ranch! Pablo cannot make himself imposing, no matter how much finery he puts on. Oh, Mr. Anthrop! you ought to be ashamed at being jealous of him!"

At this Fred blushed more than ever, and mumbled something unintelligible.

When the dance was over, he sought for Nell, but failed to find her for some time. At length he came upon her talking with Pablo, and plainly trying to escape from him, though the Mexican clung to one of her hands and spoke in low, earnest tones. With a feeling of hot anger in his heart, Fred approached, succeeding by an effort in fully controlling his voice, as he said:

"I believe you have promised me the next dance, Miss Welland?"

A look of relief and pleasure flashed over her face, as she quickly turned toward him, replying:

"It was the next, I think."

Pablo muttered something that sounded strangely like a curse, as he felt her fingers slip from his grasp, and he shot a loveless look at the young American, saying:

"Your pardon, senor; I was speaking with the senorita."

Again Fred put a strong check on his temper, bowing coldly as he spoke:

"You will excuse me, I trust. I will wait till she is at liberty."

He retreated a short distance and turned his back on them; but in less than half a minute he felt Nell's hand on his arm. As he led her away, he could not refrain from flashing a look of triumph at Pablo, who was glaring sullenly after them.

"Oh, Fred, I am so glad!" exclaimed Nell, as soon as they were beyond ear-shot of the foreman of the Diamond Ranch. "I am scarcely afraid of anything, but I had begun to fear that

fellow. I did not seem to be able to get rid of him, and he was actually trying to coax me to go outside with him."

"The dog!" gritted Fred. "Did he offer you any insult? If so, I will have—"

"No, no! he was exceedingly polite."

But, for all of this assurance, the young man was not satisfied.

"He had better keep out of my way," he muttered.

When the next dance was over he looked in vain for Pablo. The gaudily-attired little fellow had disappeared.

The merriment continued fast and furious, the scene being peculiar to a ranch dance, where everybody seems to go in for a good time. Orson Colfax danced once or twice with Nina Robinson for a partner, and even rough old Round-up Rube renewed his youth and shook his heavy boots in a manner that threatened to drown the music.

At length it was noticed Nellie Welland was missing. Fred began inquiring anxiously for her, but for a long time no one seemed able to tell him anything of her. Nina Robinson finally said she believed she had seen the missing girl ascending to the upper part of the house some time before. The rancher's daughter volunteered to go in search of the lost one, flitting away up the stairs.

The guests were selecting partners for another dance, and the musicians drawing soft sounds from their instruments, when—

From the upper portion of the ranch came a shriek—a woman's cry!—which startled and electrified all who heard it!

CHAPTER III.

THE WORK OF THE SCOURGE.

FOR a moment after that startling cry every one seemed paralyzed, then Cy Robinson started for the stairs, shouting:

"That was Nina! Something has happened! She would not cry out in that way for nothing!"

Fred Anthrop and Chris Comstock followed at his heels, while Round-up Rube turned to check the surge of the guests, two-thirds of whom were eager to investigate the cause of the alarm.

"Slow an' stiddy!" cried the bow-legged cowboy, blocking the doorway. "I'll 'low thet yoop kem frum ther gals' private chamber, an' thar bain't any reason w'y this bull crowd sh'ud rush in thar. You'll fine out w'at ther matter is, ef you'll jest keep still fer er bit."

But he stepped aside before Rodney Welland, whose eyes were gleaming strangely, allowing the man to pass, without a word.

"It's his gal he's lookin' fer," explained the foreman, as he once more blocked the doorway.

Cy Robinson found the door of the girl's room standing wide open when he reached the head of the stairs. A glance within showed him his daughter standing near the center of the room, wildly staring at a slip of paper she held in her outstretched hand. In a moment he was at her side, crying:

"What is it, Nina? You look like you had seen a ghost! Where is Miss Welland?"

She tried to speak, but seemed to find it impossible to do so. Silently she held the slip of paper toward him. He took it, seeing there was writing upon it, but instantly handed it to Chris, as the young cowboy entered with Fred Anthrop.

"Read it, lad!" he said—"read it aloud!"

"Where is Nell?" demanded Fred, looking wildly around for the one he loved.

"Perhaps that paper will tell," responded the ranchman. "She is not here. Read it, Chris, read it!"

This was what Chris Comstock read:

"CYRUS ROBINSON:—By the time this falls beneath your eyes your daughter will be in my power and far beyond your reach. I have come back to the San Juan Valley for a purpose—and that purpose is vengeance! This is my first blow; others shall follow. I shall never stay my hand, for I know not the meaning of the word mercy to one who has wronged me as you have. THE BLACK PHENIX."

The ranch-owner heard this like one dazed, and even when Chris had finished reading the strange note, he looked puzzled.

Rodney Welland had entered the room in time to hear the contents of the note, and a startling sound came from his bearded lips—a harsh laugh!

"What in the world does it mean?" cried Robinson helplessly.

"Mean!" echoed Welland, his eyes blazing and his manner reminding them all of the short time before when he was known as "Old Rattle-brain." "Ha! ha! ha! It means that the devil

has broken loose again—Satan is out of the pit! Mean! It means trouble, war, blood!"

The words of a madman, so thought they all.

"Are you sure that you read that right?" excitedly demanded the rancher. "Why, that note is addressed to me—it speaks of *my* daughter! And my daughter is here!" passing a strong arm around Nina's waist and glaring around as if he half-expected a denial of the assertion.

"And my daughter is gone!" burst from Welland's lips. "They have taken her from me, and I have only found her after all these long, long and weary years! Devils! fiends! I will find her—I will tear her from their hands! As there is a God, I will!"

Chris Comstock's hand fell on the excited man's arm, and the young cowboy spoke calmly:

"Do not jump at a conclusion so quickly, Mr. Welland. It is not yet settled your daughter has been carried away. She may still be near at hand."

"But that paper—"

"We know not how it came here. Perhaps Miss Nina will be able to give us some light."

But the rancher's daughter was unable to tell them anything further than that she had found the room empty, the window open and the slip of paper on the dressing-case.

At this instant the sound of excited voices came from below.

"No, ye can't go up thar now, Pete; you will hev ter stay down hyer with ther rest tell we fine out what's ther matter."

"But I jes' am goin' up dar! I knows suffin' 's happened to lit'l Missy Nell—I jes' knows it fo' suah! S'pose I's goin' to stay down heur waitin' to fine out w'at it am? Well, I jes' reckum not! If yo' don' le' me pass, I's gwine ter bus' my banjer ober yo' head, critter—yo' heur me!"

In some way the devoted darky succeeded in passing the cowboy on guard, for he soon appeared in the chamber.

"Whar am she?" he cried, "whar am my lit'l missus? If any critter hab hurt her I'll knock his eye out, shore's I's libbin' an' brea'n!"

Fred Anthrop had seemed dazed, but he now caught up the light and hurried to the open window. Two feet beneath the window ran a sloping roof, which explained how the kidnapper had succeeded in carrying away his captive. A bit of cloth fluttering from the head of a projecting nail caught his eye. In an instant he had it in his fingers. It was a scrap of the very dress Nell had worn that evening!

"It is hers, sure enough," said Cowboy Chris at Fred's shoulder. "That decides it!"

Then he wheeled toward Cy Robinson—who still seemed like one dazed—crying:

"Foul work, Mr. Robinson! There is not a moment to be wasted! The quicker we get to work, the greater our chance to success."

"What's to be done, boys?"

"Turn the entire company into a search-party and scour the neighborhood. If that fails, carry it still further and scour the country."

Within a few minutes every cowboy present was searching for the missing one, all being under the charge of Round-up Rube and Cowboy Chris.

"Tell 'em ter look fer thet p'ison sarpint, Pablo Pajario!" said the foreman to Chris. "I'll bet suthin' ther cussid Greaser is at ther bottom o' this yere piece o' devilment!"

Fred Anthrop heard these words, and a sudden conviction that Rube had struck the truth flashed over him. He instantly told his companions how the Mexican had tried to induce Nell to leave the house with him.

"Thet *duz* settle it!" snarled the bow-legged cowboy, driving the clinched fist of his right hand into the horny palm of his left, thus making a report as loud as a pistol of small caliber. "Ther skunk tried ter git her out ter work this yere racket. He's ther varmint ter look fer!"

"Do you think he is Black Phenix?" asked Chris.

"Ef he hain't, then he's Black Phenix's tool, an' by layin' claws on him, we may be able ter grip his master."

So the word went round to look sharp for Pablo the Mexican. It came to the ears of Orson Colfax, and the tenderfoot rancher came spluttering to Cy Robinson.

"What it's thith, thir—what I heah?" he demanded, seeming highly indignant. "They thay my foreman hath carried off thith girl. I do not believe it, thir—I do not believe it! But if the wascal weally hath, I will punish him weal hard—I thurely will!"

"If he is at the bottom of this, you are not liable to see him again," came coldly from

Robinson's lips. "I am inclined to think he is, and this is simply confirmation of my belief that none of the accursed whelps can be trusted."

Nell's father and the faithful servant Pete seemed the most distracted by the blow. Fred Anthrop was strangely cool and calm, but there was a fire in his eyes which told of the check he was keeping on himself.

"This is dreadful, Fred!" exclaimed Chris, feelingly. "I understand all that is consuming you, for is not Nellie nearly as dear to me? She is the only girl I ever truly loved, and I will confess my passion is not dead, though I know it is vain. I am still ready to give up my life for her, if necessary!"

"It is useless for me to attempt to express my feelings in mere words," came with forced calmness from the young Easterner's white lips. "But, one thing I will say: whoever or whatever this Black Phenix is, no matter where he may have taken her, I will yet find her and save her—I will yet find and destroy him!"

"Good! I am with you, Fred, to the end, and here is my hand on it! We are pards through thick and thin, sink or swim, live or die, and from this moment the Scourge of the San Juan is doomed!"

Their hands met in a grasp that sealed the compact.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLACK RAIDER'S DARING.

NELLIE WELLAND was not found. The search for her was vain; she was indeed gone. Neither did the search for Pablo Pajario prove a success. Like the girl, the Mexican had vanished, and it was not at all strange that the cowboys should associate the disappearance of one with that of the other.

"Ef I c'u'd lay my han's on ther cussid Greaser now," growled Round-up Rube, "it'd be er right easy thing ter rekyver ther leetle gal, God bless her black eyes!"

Pablo's horse on which he had ridden to the ranch was gone.

"It's derned queer thar hain't any other annimills gone too," asserted the bow-legged cowboy.

"Black Phenix hed er good time ter scoop 'em, an' ther job w'u'dn't 'a' bin ary bit bolder then ther one he worked—no, ner so bold by er heap sight!"

"The wretch chose an excellent night for his first stroke since returning to this section," observed Cy Robinson. "But it would seem that naturally he would strike at some of the other ranches, where there are only one or two cowboys left behind to defend the places."

"He may have struck at them as well."

"Good gwatbuth!" gasped Orson Colfax, who had overheard these words. "I do hope the confounded wascal will not trouble my p'roperty!"

"Ten to one he does, if Pablo Pajario is the Black Phenix or one of his tools. He may have worked himself into your employ for that very purpose."

"Where it's my borthel!" squawked the thoroughly alarmed rancher. "Where are my men? I will sthart for home at onthe!"

Suddenly from behind one of the out-buildings appeared a horse and rider. The animal was coal-black with a white star in its forehead, and the clothes and hood which the rider wore made him as black as his steed.

Cries of astonishment came from the cowboys as they flashed their lights on the dark figures, which had come to a dead halt some distance away, the man gazing toward them through the eye-holes of the black cloth which covered his face.

"Ther Black Phenix, ur I'm er liar!" shouted Round-up Rube.

For a moment every one seemed paralyzed with astonishment at the daring of the cattle-lifter; then, uttering a savage imprecation, the bow-legged cowboy jerked out a revolver and covered the figure.

"Han's up, critter, or I'll bore ye!"

The reply was a contemptuous laugh, but the black horseman lifted his hands—lifted them with a revolver in each!

"Compliments of the Black Phenix!" he cried.

From either hand leaped spouts of red flame and the sharp crack-crack of his weapons drew yells of amazement from the cattle-men, two or three of the cowboys reeling back and sinking to the ground.

Round-up Rube was untouched, and with a deliberation that was wonderful under the circumstances, he fired shot after shot straight at the squarely-exposed breast of the Scourge. Still not a bullet seemed to take effect!

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Again that contemptuous laugh, as, like a

machine, the black horse of the raider wheeled on its hind feet, its master bending low in the saddle.

Click-click! The hammers of Rube's revolvers fell on empty cartridges!

An oath of dismay came from the old fellow's lips, but the next instant he shouted:

"Wake up, lads! Give him hot lead, ye sleepy-heads! Fire at ther hoss, fer I'll bet er steer ther man's protected by some kind o' armor! Fire at ther hoss! *fire at ther hoss!*"

Half a dozen weapons spoke just as the daring outlaw disappeared behind the building; but if one of the flying bullets reached its mark, there was no sign.

"Hosses, pards, hosses!" bellowed the foreman of the Robinson Ranch. "We'll foller ther critter ter his hoel!"

Then there was saddling and mounting in hot haste, but even as they were about this, Old Rube said:

"Don't more'n hafe o' us want ter foller this critter; t'other better stay hyer. This may be er trick ter lead us off an' then finish up ther job jest begun. Hang ter ther ranch, Pard Robinson, an' look out fer yer own leetle gal!"

Rodney Welland suddenly appeared, mounted on a large horse, and, with a wild shout that went ringing through the night, he dashed in pursuit of the daring outlaw.

"This blow has driven him crazy again," said Chris, as he aided Fred Anthrop in preparing a horse for the chase. "Once more he is Old Rattlebrain, as he was when we first saw him."

"He has my horse!" cried one of the guests. "If he cannot overtake the Black Phenix on that animal, the outlaw's horse must be driven by steam. But it is doubtful if I ever see Dandy Lightfoot again."

"If you do not. I will make the loss good," assured Cy Robinson.

With Rube at their head, the cowboys swept away into the night, following Old Rattlebrain, whose wild cries could be plainly heard at regular intervals. The bow-legged foreman felt the chase was folly itself, but what *could* they do? It was impossible to remain idle, and this seemed the only course open to them.

"We shall not overtake the Scourge," said Chris, in a tone just loud enough to reach the ears of the foreman.

"Think so?"

"I do. Don't you?"

"Waal, I will 'low ther chances are 'ginst it."

"He can easily slip us in the darkness."

"I reckon you're right."

"I believe this is a trick to lead us away."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so."

"And we have swallowed the bait."

"An' still, ef it be er trick, it hain't goin' ter work jest as ther critter hoped, fer thar hain't only part o' us arter him. T'others are lookin' arter ther ranch an' corraled stock."

"Do you really believe Gablo Pajario is the Black Phenix?"

"Waal, I saw ther critter's hoss w'en he arrived ter-night."

"What of that?"

"It wuz black."

"Ah-a! With a white start?"

"Thet's jest w'at I can't say, fer I didn't 'zamine ther critter clost."

"Still, it looks as if the Greaser is our meat?"

"I 'low it duz."

"Did you ever hear the Black Phenix was a Mexican?"

"I've heerd so menny yarns 'bout ther critter thet I never knew w'at ter believe. But, one thing's sart'in: he's wussen ther Old One hisself, an' now he is back inter these parts, thar won't be ary bit o' peace tell he is turned toes up ter ther daisies ur druv out. It's war, Chris—war ter ther knife!"

The cries of the crazed parent ahead could be plainly heard, still some of the men declared they were not so distinct as at first.

"Ike Thompson said his hoss wuz more then er match fer ther black critter o' ther Scourge," observed Rube. "Ef ther leetle gal's daddy ketches ther raider, ther fur will fly, you bet! I dunno whether he's armed ur not, but ef he ever gits his han's on Black Phenix, ther imp o' Satan 'll giter through ticket."

"Rodney Welland's strength is something wonderful," acknowledged Chris. "He is more than a match for four common men."

"True as preachin', boy!"

Before long they discovered the cries of the deranged were truly growing fainter.

"Dern ther luck!" growled the bow-legged cowboy. "Thet's all we hev got ter keep us on ther trail."

"What fools we were!" cried Chris.

"Why?"
 "We might have put Old Spot on the trail."
 "True, lad, dern my ole head fer not thinkin' of it! Ther dog w'u'd 'a' tracked ther critter ter his hoel."

"But now—"
 "Too late! Ther trail hes bin trampled out by our hosses. Ther only chance is ter keep on."

"And that is no chance at all."
 "You can't tell," doggedly. "Black Phenix's boss may take a tumble an' break a leg."

So the chase continued.
 But it was time wasted, for in the end they were forced to give it up, no longer having anything by which to be guided, the cries of the deranged father being heard no more.

The cowboys drew rein to give their mounts a breathing-spell, while they discussed the situation.

That Fred Anthrop was in despair was plainly evident, although he spoke few words, and then only when he was addressed.

"There is one point about this affair I cannot understand," asserted Chris.

"What's that?"
 "It is why the note from Black Phenix was addressed to Cy Robinson, and spoke as if his daughter was the one captured."

"I 'low ther critters must hev made er mistake, lad. Black Phenix him own self never kerried off ther gal; his tools done that. He writ ther letter an' 'tended fer 'em to scoop in Miss Nina, but they made er mistake an' tuck t'other 'un."

"I believe you are right, Rube. It is—"
 He was interrupted by a cry from one of the cowboys.

"Look yender! What's that light 'way thar ter ther East?"

Every man turned in the direction indicated, and lying low down against the horizon they could distinguish a faint red flush that grew larger and plainer with each passing moment.

"Is it the moon?"
 "Not by er derned sight!"
 "Thar hain't no moon fer ter-night."
 "Then what is it?"
 "Fire!"

That word solved the riddle.
 "But thet hain't in ther direction o' Cy Robinson's."

"No; it is far to the east of there. It is—"
 "Ther D'mon' Ranch!"
 "Sure pop!"

"Ther buildin's o' ther Tenderfoot Rancher are afire! This is more o' ther Black Phenix's work! Ther devil hes bruck loose ter-night fer sure! Spurs, pards, spurs! It's as near ter ther fire as 'tis back ter Cy Robinson's. We're wanted thar!"

One of the cowboys was detached to give the alarm at the Robinson Ranch, if they had not already discovered the fire, while the others dashed through the darkness toward that red beacon, which was rising so swiftly, painting the eastern sky with a ruddy tinge.

CHAPTER V.

IN RUFFIANLY HANDS.

WHAT small and seemingly insignificant things sometimes make vast changes in the lives of human beings. Had not her hair become loosened from the dainty coil in which it was arranged, Nellie Welland would not have ascended to the chamber that she might have the aid of a glass in re-coiling it; and had she not ascended to the chamber, she would not have fallen into the hands of the ruffian who had gained entrance to the house and was hiding there like a beast of prey that is lying in wait for its unsuspecting victim.

As she passed into the chamber she was seized from behind by powerful hands which held her helpless, and a thick cloth that gave out a sickening odor was pressed over her mouth and nose, preventing her from uttering the shriek of terror which arose to her lips.

The desperate wretch had not made a sound till he clutched the girl, and she had no warning of another presence in the room till she found herself in his hands, powerless to resist.

Powerless? Even though it was so, she struggled with all her fresh young strength. Like a flash, thoughts of a horrible fate passed through her mind, and she made despairing efforts to break from that powerful grasp or to free her mouth from the nauseating cloth long enough to utter a cry that would alarm those below.

"Tain't nary bit o' use, lady bird!" hissed the ruffian who had attacked her. "You kin kick an' squarm, but it won't do nary leetle bit o' good. Yer Uncle Jim's got his claws onter

ye, an' ye can't break erway frum him, you bet!"

For one instant her eyes were free of the cloth, and she caught a fair look at the man's face. A feeling of horror came over her, for, although his face was turned aside, and he was watching the open doorway through which she had entered the chamber, she recognized him as Whisky Jim, a brutal ruffian who had caused her much trouble in the past.

The realization that she was in the hands of this dastardly wretch seemed to rob her of all her strength, and she sunk helplessly into his arms, her senses beginning to reel.

Strange thoughts ran riot through her brain; wild fancies held high revel there. In scarcely more than an instant of time, a hundred shifting scenes seemed to pass before her view. Then she felt herself lifted and borne through the air as if on the back of a mighty bird. She could feel the motions of its body as it swept forward through space, the strokes of its enormous wings making its body move like the regular undulations of ocean waves. It was delightful! A great calm seized upon her, even though it seemed as if they were moving so fast she could scarcely catch her breath. The delightful movement seemed to affect her like some rare old wine that sends one into a dreamy state of torpor.

But, suddenly, there was a shock and she felt herself thrown from the back of the monster of the air to go whirling downward through limitless space. Down, down, down! Would the frightful fall never end? She knew there could be but one termination—she would be dashed into a thousand pieces! Instant death would meet her the moment she should strike the earth! With bated breath she waited for the end.

It came! There was a second shock—a thousand lights blazed before her eyes for an instant—utter darkness followed—she was unconscious!

She never knew anything of her removal from the ranch; it was accomplished while she remained in a senseless state. Her senses came slowly back to her, and long before she could stir hand or foot she was conscious that two men were talking close beside her. Their voices seemed vague and far away, and although she plainly heard their words, she afterward could not remember a single thing they spoke. For all of that, before she could stir at all, she realized the men were desperadoes of the lowest type.

Something seemed to restrict her breathing; her jaws were aching as if from a severe strain; she tried to swallow and only half succeeded. There was a gag in her mouth!

As the realization of this flashed through her head, she became fully conscious in the twinkling of an eye. She remained perfectly still, making no move save a slight strain which told her that her hands and feet were bound. She understood she was lying on the bare ground. Utter darkness was all around her, and from overhead came a soft rustling she could not understand at first, but she this finally decided was caused by the leaves of trees. Then she must be in a piece of timberland somewhere.

The voices of her captors once more attracted her attention, and she listened to the words they were saying. They spoke in guarded tones, making it plainly apparent they feared detection. They were not yet aware their captive had recovered consciousness.

"Slickest job I ever worked, Mike," grunted the harsh voice of Whisky Jim. "It wuz jest like rollin' off er log. Gal never uttered so much as er whimper."

"Wal, I dunno as I wonder," confessed a voice which the girl recognized as belonging to Nevada Mike, Whisky Jim's partner in crime. "You must 'a' squozed her thrapple ur else she'd bin kickin' by this time."

"Nary squoze, Pard Mike! I wuz gentle as er mammy with her kid. I jest ketched her fast an' putt ther rag over her mouth, same as ther boss said. She *did* kick an' squarm, but I held to her fer business. Bet yer duats! Ther rag an' ther stuff w'at I emptied out it from ther leetle bottle jest done ther work."

"Hanged ef I hain't skeered thet it done it too well!" and Nevada Mike bent closely over the captive and peered into her face, during which inspection Nell closed her eyes and feigned unconsciousness. "She don't seem ter kem round wu'th er dern."

"Oh, don't you gotter fussin'!" came contemptuously from the whisky tough's lips. "Ther boss knew w'at he wuz doin' w'en he guv me ther stuff an' tole me how ter use it. She'll be all O. K. ez soon ez we wants her to. Ther stiller she is now ther better et will be fer us."

"She'd be still enough anyhow with thet gag atwixt her jaws. We'll hev ter take thet out—"

"Wal, not yit erwhile, by er derned sight!"
 "No, not tell we are safe beyond hearshot of ther critters back thar at ther ranch. We don't keer 'bout gittin' them critters arter us, eh, pard?"

"Wal, I 'lows *not*! I hain't hankerin' fer er hemp necktie yit erwhile, an' thet'd be what it'd mean ef we wuz ketched. They w'u'd string us ter ther nearest tree."

"Cuss 'em, yes! It makes me kind of fidgerty ter think of it. I wonder ef ther boss will keep his word?"

"How!"
 "W'y, in leadin' ther cow-punchers on er false scent."

"Ef he don't—"

"We may fine ourselves in hot watter."
 "Kirec'. But, w'y in thunder don't they kick up er hocus at ther ranch? They hain't made er stir."

"Hain't diskivered ther gal' gone yit. Wait till they do, an' I'll 'low you'll see all ther hocus we'll keer fer. Arter ther boss takes 'em off on ther false scent, we kin git outer this bresh-patch an' lean fer ther Retreat."

"We might 'a' bin er good long way on ther road by this time ef we'd started at fu'st."

"But I'm 'beyin' ther boss's orders, ev'ry time. He said ter lay low hyer tell he led ther critters off t'other way, then ter git."

"Ef you wuz allus so keerful 'bout 'beyin' orders, you w'u'dn't bin hafe-shot w'en you went after ther gal ter-night. I didn't 'low you'd ever git erway with her."

"I hed ter hev ther whisk' ter brace me, pard. It wuz er derned ticklish job. Is ther bottle clean empty?"

"Nary drap left!"
 "Wal, thet's tough. I reckon I'll hev ter smoke then."

In the darkness Whisky Jim produced pipe and tobacco, whittling small chips from the plug with his bowie-knife and grinding them between his horny palms.

"Better git low down w'en ye strike ther match," suggested Mike. "Ef some prowlin' critter sh'u'd ketch ther glimp', ther devil'd be ter pay."

The whisky tough profited by the suggestion, and soon his pipe was working finely and he was puffing out great volumes of rank-smelling tobacco-smoke.

"Thar's nuthin' like takin' things easy w'en yer hev ter," he chuckled.

Mike said nothing, but stretched himself on the ground, and for some time there was silence between them. At length, Whisky Jim asked:

"Who do you reckon ther boss is, anyhow?"

"I hain't reckonin' nary derned thing 'bout it," was the sharp reply. "An' I 'low you'd best not reckon."

"W'y?"

"It's plain ther boss don't keer 'bout any of us knowin' *who* he is."

"All ther same, thar are some of ther ban' as knows it."

"Thet may be; but we are new members. He said this job wuz ter try us. Ef we done ther work well, then he'd know he c'u'd trust us. I reckon we'll know all thet's necessary w'en ther time comes fer it."

"All ther same, I am kind of intrusted ter know who Black Phenix is an' I hev my 'pinion. It's plain he's er Greaser."

"Ef he heard you say thet, he'd snuff ye out in er jiff. Best take keer of thet tongue, Jim, ef ye wants ter live. They don't none of 'em fancy bein' called Greasers."

Whisky Jim grunted, and Mike added:

"Ef he's got Mexican blood in his veins, thar's *one thing* sart'in: he hain't no coward like ther most of ther critters. He'd never made ther name he has ef he hed bin er coward."

"An' thar's another thing mighty sure: he's er derned hard cuss ter kill. They've hed him dead no less then hafe er dozen times, but he's still kickin'."

"Yep; an' he's goin' ter kick up er mighty rumpus in this hyer section afore long. This is only ther beginnin' of his work; nobody kin tell whar it will en."

"I s'pose he's scoopin' in ther gal fer ther puppose of gittin' er ransom outer ole Cy Robinson?"

"Most likely."

"Ole Cy will pod over lib'ral."

"Ef he has ter; but, he will make this yere section too mighty warm fer comfut—you hear me shout! Ther boss is buckin' erg'in' ther wu'st man he c'u'd tackle."

For a few minutes Whisky Jim smoked im-

silence, then he leaned forward and once more tried to peer into the captive's face.

"She is layin' mighty still," he confessed. "She'd oughter be stirrin' by this time. I can't see her face wu'th er hoot, it is so blamed dark. Reckon I will strike er match."

He did so, shielding it with the palms of his half-closed hands. Bending forward, he was on the point of throwing the light into the captive's face and making a startling discovery, when Nevada Mike suddenly hissed:

"Douse it, pard—out, out! Ther dogs hev bruck loose at ther ranch!"

Across the dark sweep of rolling plain came the sounds of excited cries, followed in a moment by the braying of dogs, causing both of the kidnappers to leap to their feet, Whisky Jim extinguishing the match between his callous hands.

Outside the ranch-buildings lights were moving hither and thither. Men were calling to each other and the dogs continued to bark.

"W'at ef they putt them dogs onto our track?" hoarsely whispered the whisky tough, his voice shaking with a new-born fear.

"I dunno how they're goin' ter do it," said Mike. "They can't pick out our trail ef they try, thar are so menny others ter foul it."

"But ef they c'u'd—"

"Our goose w'u'd be cooked fer sure. But wait; whar's ther boss? Ef he keeps his word, we're all right."

"Ef he duz!"

"He will; don't git shaky, pard."

Half crouching, as if they feared detection despite the dense darkness and the distance which intervened between them and the ranch, they watched and waited, consumed by a fear that some of the cowboys would take it into their heads to visit the little patch of timber. Slowly the minutes dragged by.

"Will ther boss never play his hand?"

"Yep—thar he goes!"

The rattle of pistol-shots came from the direction of the ranch, mingled with still wilder shouts of amazement and dismay.

"Ter work!" hissed Nevada Mike. "Git ther hosses ready; I'll look arter ther gal."

As he bent over the captive she struggled violently to burst her bonds, having a wild desire to free her hands, snatch the gag from her mouth and utter a shriek that would reach the ears of the brave cowboys, and bring them charging to her rescue.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mike, as she moved beneath his touch. "So you are kickin', eh? Well, kick erway, my dear; we hev ye tight an' fast. As you hev kem roun', I reckon I'll hev ter muffle up yer eyes ter keep ye frum seein' too much. Sorry ter do it, honey, but business is business ev'ry time, an' we'd be blamed fools ter let ye hev ther use of yer peepers. Boss said ter keep 'em kivered, an' I'm 'beyin' orders w'en he guvs 'em."

In a few moments her eyes were securely blindfolded. Then she was lifted in Mike's strong arms and carried a short distance.

"Critters all ready, pard?"

"All ready," replied Jim.

"Swing up, you, an' take ther gal."

So Nell was passed up to the whisky tough, and, a moment later, they were moving out of the grove, taking care to keep the timber between them and the ranch, despite the darkness.

The two ruffians moved at a gallop, well knowing the excitement at the ranch would destroy the last possibility of the tread of their animals being detected, even though Round-up Rube himself should listen with his ear to the ground.

"Slick work, ole man!" chuckled Mike.

"Ev'rythin' went as if 'twuz greased."

"All ther same, thar wuzn't ary need of our waitin' in ther timber," retorted Jim. "We hed heap plenty time ter git clean off."

"But we wuz only 'beyin' orders."

Then they rode on in silence. Several times the captive maiden was exchanged, the kidnappers taking turns in carrying her. To the poor girl it seemed as if they had ridden many hours, when an exclamation came from Mike's lips, and both men drew rein.

"W'at is it?" asked Jim, in an awe-stricken whisper.

"Derned ef I kin tell! It hain't ther moon, an' ther sun hain't risin', less it has made a mistake an' lost its reckonin'."

"Hain't ther grass afire, pard?"

"Mebbe. Anyhow, I guess it's er fire. See how it's risin'! No, ther hain't no grass-fire! Thet means buildin's!"

"Some ranch?"

"You've struck it! An' by ther direction—Derned ef it hain't ther Di'mon' Ranch!"

"Sure pop, ur I dunno my head frum er hoel in ther groun'!"

"Ther Tenderfoot Rancher's bein' burned out."

"W'at's it mean?"

"Mean? W'y, man! can't you see? It means more of ther chief's work! P'raps his own han' never sot thet fire, but I'll eat my head ef some of ther gang didn't do it under his direcshuns!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WILD RIDE THROUGH THE NIGHT.

It was with difficulty Cy Robinson kept many of the cowboys from joining in the pursuit of the black-hooded rider of the dark horse. Their blood was fairly boiling, and they were eager to avenge the fall of their mates who had been shot down by the daring Scourge.

"There are enough going after him," protested the rancher. "They will be able to overtake him if such a thing is possible, and their number will do the work as well as more. This may be a trick to draw us from the ranch while the dastards who own that wretch as chief complete the work they have begun."

Not that there was a single drop of cowardly blood in the old rancher's veins! Far from it! But he was wise enough to perceive the evident hopelessness of the pursuit, and he thought of his own child and those women who would be left without protection. His cooler judgment prevailed, and more than one-half of the men turned to look after those who had been stricken down by the bullets of the black horseman.

The unfortunates were lifted gently and carried into the ranch, where the frightened women were huddled together, speaking in whispers. Nina Robinson at once proved her value. She produced cloths for bandages, and under her directions, the wounds of the unlucky ones were swiftly attended to.

By rare good fortune, not a man had been fatally injured. There was a general feeling of thankfulness when this became known.

The guests discussed the outrage, and all were unanimous in the decision that an organized attempt must be immediately made to bring Black Phenix to justice, or again drive him from that part of the country.

"If that wascal ith going to carry on in thith way, I will thell my p'roperty for half-pwithe," asserted Orson Colfax, who seemed the most alarmed of anybody. "Thith ith thomething I did not bargain for when I bought that wanch, by gwathuth!"

"I told you you might find ranching far from being as alluring as it seemed at first," said Cy Robinson. "There are not a few drawbacks about it."

"Well, I thould thay tho!"

"Day hab kerried off my pore lit'l' missy!" wailed Pete, the darky, appearing at this moment. "Oh, I'se nebber gwine ter be happy no mo', nebber! Dis yar jes' completely combustercates me fo' suah! Pore lit'l' missy! pore lit'l' missy!"

"She shall be rescued, Pete," assured Cy Robinson, gravely. "We will know no rest till she is saved. The whole country will rise in her behalf."

"Praise de Lawd fo' dat! I's gwine ter hang up de banjer tell I jes' gits her back in dese yar arms—I is, boss! I's allus protected dat chile an' stood by her lek a fadder, an' now it jes' bre'ks me all up to hab her incinderated in dis yar way. My ole heart am gone clear outen my bddy."

He shambled away, looking at least twenty years older than when he sung the song a brief time before.

"A faithful old servant," commented Cy Robinson, looking after him. "He has a heart that is true blue, if his skin is black."

"But, he ith a niggah, y'know!" protested Colfax, with a look of repugnance on his smooth face. "I cawn't bear niggahs!"

Cy Robinson turned on the Tenderfoot Rancher, uttering something that sounded strangely like an oath of disgust. For a moment the old rancher forgot his usual courtesy, as he snapped:

"You can't stand a niggah! Well, I swear! Yet you can stand a Greaser, beside whom that old black man is a prince! You can have for a foreman one of the contemptible yaller-skinned—the meanest, sneakingest, double-faced whelps that breathe God's pure air! Colfax, you make me tired!"

The face of the tenderfoot flushed hotly, and he seemed on the point of making a reply, but he restrained himself, more than one of the witnesses believing he dared not make a retort to the indignant ranchman.

But, as the owner of the Diamond Ranch turned away, a change came over Robinson's face, and he caught Colfax by the arm.

"Say, partner!" his voice having changed as well as his expression of countenance; "I ask your pardon. I fired up too quick, but I do so at times. I did not mean anything, and I hope you will overlook what I said."

He offered his hand, and, with a show of dignity, Orson Colfax accepted it, saying:

"Thath all wight. I athure you I do not expect your people out heah to have the cultivation of uth of the East. We are naturally more wefined, y'know."

A smile passed over the honest rancher's face.

"I suppose that is true," he confessed. "That being the case, you cannot take offense if I give you a bit of advice free of charge. It is simply this; get rid of your present foreman at once. Or, better still, snap him up and pinch him till he confesses that he is the Black Phenix or one of the Scourge's trusted tools."

"Pinch him?"

"Yes; make him confess."

"Do you weally think he ith that dweadful wascal?"

"It looks that way. What kind of a horse does Pablo ride?"

"A black one."

"With a white star in its forehead?"

"I think tho."

"Did you notice the horse of the outlaw?"

"Land tbaketh, no! I wath tho flustherd that I did not notice anything."

"It was black with a white star."

"Ith that tho? Good gwathuth!"

Orson Colfax seemed too astounded to give further vent to his feelings.

The merrymaking of the night was over, and many of the guests took an immediate departure, having property of their own to look after and feeling somewhat nervous for its safety since the appearance of the Black Phenix.

Orson Colfax finally called together his men and bade them prepare for the return to the Diamond Ranch. In a short time they were ready, one of them bringing the Tenderfoot Rancher's saddle horse to him.

Colfax held out his hand to Cy Robinson before they parted.

"If I can do anything in the way of athisthing in the thirch for the young lady, I truthly you will let me know," he said. "I athure you, myself and my men are at your dithposal."

Before the party had ridden a mile they detected the glow which was beginning to light up the horizon far ahead. At first they were puzzled to understand what it meant, but one of the cowboys suddenly exclaimed:

"It's fire, boss—fire, sure as shootin'! An' ther ranch is in edzactly thet direction! It looks like ther buildin's are all ablaze!"

For a moment Orson Colfax seemed dazed, then a cry broke from his lips:

"It ith the work of thetbe confounded wobbers! What thall we do?"

"Ride—ride like ther devil!" shouted the cowboy addressed. "Ben Ford an' Jack Kipper are thar. They need us an' need us bad! Kem on!"

Orson Colfax needed no urging. He drove the spurs into the sides of his horse till they dripped blood and the fiery animal, snorting with pain, carried its rider to the very front of the little party, a position maintained during all that wild ride through the night.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO SHOTS.

ALTHOUGH he claimed to have learned horsemanship at a riding-school where the pupil was first mounted on a wooden dummy, Orson Colfax proved himself as good as the best of his cowboys that night. Never before had his men seen the Tenderfoot Rancher ride like that. He sat in the saddle as though a part of his horse, scarcely betraying a sign of the mechanical manner in which he often rode and at which the cowboys had secretly laughed. For the time he was a man among them.

As they swept onward with their eyes fixed on that red glow ahead, it became plainly evident the fire was rising rapidly. For all of this apparent fact, not a word came from the tightly-compressed lips of the one who owned the buildings being consumed by the fire fiend. But he was merciless with his spurs, and if he had not been mounted on an unusually fine animal, the horse would have been ruined or have fallen to the rear to allow the more considerate cowboys first place.

"Ther hull derned place is blazin'!" cried one of the men. "Ther devil is loose in ther San Juan Valley now thet Black Phenix is back!"

"Right, pard," agreed another. "We hed

best look ter our weepins, fer we may find hot work w'en we git 'bar."

"More likely ther critters will be gone an' we'll only find ther dead bodies of Ben an' Jack."

"Ef ther p'ison varmints hev killed our pards, we'll sw'ar vengeance over their bodies!"

And the fierce cry that came from the lips of every man told how ready the rough fellows were to agree to that. That night's work was to put relentless trailers on the track of the Scourge.

The glare of the fire shone redly against the sky, telling almost as plainly as words of the devastation the demon was working.

"Looker Colfax!" muttered one, as the rancher arose in the stirrups as if eager to view the work the flames were performing—"looker ther boss! I sw'ar, I dunno but thar's some good stuff in ther leetle man arter all!"

"Ef he holds ther lead clean through, I'll say thar may be," acknowledged another. "But he'll never keep ther lead."

"Why?"

"Thet hoss'll drop under him afore we rise ther swell this side of ther buildin's whar we kin see 'em. He is killin' ther critter!"

But the buckskin which the Tenderfoot Rancher rode was made of better material than the cowboy thought.

The red glare of the flames lighted up the faces of the determined men as they dashed onward and revealed quite a stretch of the rolling plain.

Suddenly one of the cowboys uttered an exclamation.

"Look erway yen ter ther right!" he shouted. "Who are them?"

Dimly visible away to the right of the party was a body of horsemen who seemed to be making for the same point as they were.

"Odds that them are ther ones as went off arter ther Black Phenix!" was the cry of one.

The other party seemed to see them at this moment, and they promptly set up the far-reaching "yip, yip, yip!" of the cowboys, instantly settling the question as to their identity.

"Them's they!" joyfully shouted one of the Diamond Ranchers. "Guv 'em ther yoop, lads!"

"Yip, yip, yip!"

Like an echo, the shout went echoing across the plain.

The two parties joined as they swept up the swell that would give them a view of the conflagration, and so absorbed had they been in each other that they failed to notice the fact that the glow of the fire was rapidly decreasing instead of becoming greater.

The crest of the swell was reached, and a shout came from the lips of the men as they made the surprising discovery that the ranch-building proper was still standing. The fire had been confined to the out-buildings, and as the wind was blowing from the ranch, it had not caught at all.

By the glow of the fire-light two mounted figures could be seen dashing here and there, driving the cattle from the vicinity of the flames.

"It's only ther corral an' stables!" shouted Round-up Rube. "An' I'm durned ef it don't look like ther boys hed got pritty nigh all ther critters out!"

Still Orson Colfax spoke no word. He still held the lead, and he kept it till he threw his steaming, foam-flecked steed on its haunches before Ben Ford, who cried:

"Bless ther luck! it's ther boss!"

Then the Tenderfoot Ranchman raised his clinched fist and literally snarled:

"What in the name of thine doeth thith mean, thir? What doeth thith mean?"

"It means that some sneakin' whelp fired the stables an' corral," was the prompt and unshaken reply, as the cowboy's eyes unflinchingly met those of his master. "The fire was cunningly set and got a big start on us, but we done our level best, an' hev bin able ter save most of ther critters."

"And hath the Black Phenix been here?"

"Not that I knows on, boss; but I can't say who sot ther fire."

Orson Colfax swung himself out of the saddle and began hopping up and down like an enraged schoolboy the moment his feet touched. Never before had his men heard him utter an oath, but now he swore vigorously, for all of which his anger was so ludicrous that many of the party were compelled to turn their heads aside to hide their smiles. He really seemed on the point of bursting into tears.

Some one tried to comfort the excited man by saying it was not so bad as it might be, but that only seemed to make him the more enraged, and

he turned on his would-be comforter with a fury that was simply indescribable. He blamed everybody for what had happened, not pausing to consider that his loss was light compared with what they had supposed it would be when the red glow was first seen lighting up the sky.

Suddenly he asked:

"Where ith Pablo—where ith that dog? Hath he been here?"

"I have seen nothing of him," replied Ben Ford.

"He ith at the bottom of thith!" fumed Colfax, striking his clinched hands together. "He thall answer for thith! I wish the wascal wath here now!"

"Then your wish is gratified," said Chris Comstock. "Here he comes."

The Mexican was seen riding swiftly toward the little knot of men, who parted to allow the Tenderfoot Rancher chance to see the one for whom he had been asking.

For one moment Orson Colfax seemed to hesitate and turn pale. Then, as the Mexican drew rein with apparent wonder, asking the meaning of the fire, the little man sirode straight toward his foreman.

"You want to know what it meant, do you?" cried Colfax, his voice shaking with emotion.

"Well, thir, I have a few quethionth to athk you. Where have you been, thir, thinthe you left the Wobinthon Wanch? Anthwer that, thir!"

Pablo's dark face flushed.

"What does the senior mean by asking the question in that manner?" he demanded.

"Don't try to get out of it!" shrilly shouted the Tenderfoot Stockman, shaking his clinched fist at his foreman. "Explain what I have athked you to—if you can! Where have you been?"

"And if I decline to answer—what then?"

"I thall know you are the guilty party, thir—I thall know you thet thith fire!"

A hard look came over Pablo's face.

"I see, senior; it would be useless for me to deny it."

"Then you confeth—you acknowledge you thet it?"

"Nothing of the kind. I simply refuse to say anything about it, for no matter what I said, you would not believe me."

"You are the witch!" screamed Colfax, suddenly producing a revolver. "I have learned how they uthe thuch cweatures in thith part of the country. You thall find I am not a man to fool with, if I am a tenderfoot. Now—"

With that word, he threw up his hand, pulling the trigger just as Pablo was in the act of producing a weapon. The Mexican started as if hard hit, but the next instant his hand came up and his revolver echoed the report of the rancher's.

Without even a groan, Orson Colfax sunk to the ground, Pablo's bullet having found a living target!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLACK WORK OF A TRAITOR.

It all had happened so swiftly that not a hand could be raised to prevent the tragedy. And the apparent slayer of Orson Colfax cut not a moment's time to waste. It almost seemed as if his splendid black horse wheeled even as he fired the shot that stretched the rancher on the ground, and with a yell, the Mexican dashed away.

"Pepper ther cuss!" howled Round-up Rube.

But as half a dozen weapons spoke, Pablo disappeared behind his horse, clinging to the animal's side in true Indian fashion, guiding it so his body was protected by that of the black steed.

"After him!" burst from Chris Comstock's lips. "He is striking to round the corner of the ranch. Come on!"

Putting spurs to their already over-driven horses, the cowboys started in pursuit, their weapons in their hands.

For a moment Pablo disappeared with his horse behind the ranch, but that only afforded him a brief protection, for the cowboys were hot after him. When they sighted him beyond the ranch he had swung himself up from the side of his horse and was crouching low in the saddle in order to present a smaller target for the bullets which it was plain he expected would come whistling about his ears.

He was not disappointed, for the pursuers promptly opened fire and the lead sung viciously all around the fleeing man and his noble horse.

It often seems as if the old saying "the devil protects his own" is true, and thus it seemed to

the cowboys that night. Had they been armed with rifles, they might have brought the fleeing man tumbling from his saddle, even though their horses were going at full gallop, for there were some fine shots in the party.

The cowboys could not tell how near their bullets came to the man they were pursuing, but it seemed as if he remained quite untouched. In truth, scarcely a drop of blood was drawn and his most severe wounds were nothing more than scratches, yet many of the pursuers' bullets cut through Pablo's clothing, making his escape from fatal injury seem still more wonderful. By the rarest fortune his horse was not touched.

"Ther critter is ther devil hisself!" snarled the foreman of the Robinson Ranch. "Lead don't seem ter hev enny effect on him."

"That was the way with the Black Phenix," soberly spoke a cowboy at the old man's side.

"Sure as Gospel! Ef thet Greaser hain't ther Black Phenix I'm er derved ole fool!"

"Did you notice his horse?" asked Chris.

"Ycu bet! Same critter clean ter ther white star!"

There was no doubt in the mind of the bow-legged cowboy but the Scourge of the San Juan and Pablo Pajarito were one and the same; and he was not alone in the belief.

"Tain't any use try ter shoot ther skunk, pards," declared Rube. "He's protected in some way. Spot ther hoss! I don't reckon ther annimill is kivered with chain-armor, ur annythin' o' thet sort."

But most of the pursuers had emptied their revolvers and were slipping fresh cartridges into the cylinders as they rode, the light of the fire behind them making this an easy feat to perform.

At the same time Pablo was rapidly drawing away, his noble black horse swiftly increasing the distance between its master and his pursuers.

"Thet hoss is wuth er fortune!" cried Rube. "Ther critter don't seem blowed in ther last fer all thet this is ther second time we hev ot arter it."

On the other hand, the cowboys' horses were badly winded from that wild ride across the plain toward the burning buildings.

By the time some of the cowboys had reloaded their weapons, Pablo was so far away that there was little chance of bringing him down with a revolver-shot. However, the light of the fire still made him conspicuous, and the pursuers once more began to blaze away at him.

"This is folly," asserted Fred Anthrop, speaking for the benefit of his pledged pard, Cowboy Chris. "The fellow is already too far away for us to hope to bring him down, and our horses are so badly broken up that we cannot hope to overtake him. We may as well give it up for the present and begin in a systematic manner in the morning."

Chris looked at his friend in surprise.

"Sound sense!" he nodded. "But I swear I did not expect to hear it from your lips! Not that I think you are a fool, pard; but a tenderfoot is apt to be a little hot-headed, and in your case, it would be simply natural for one to lose all his reason."

Fred turned his grave face toward his old schoolmate.

"I feel that it is time for me to have all my wits about me, if ever; but I am actually surprised at my own calmness. At the same time, I feel as if there is a volcano in my heart that might burst forth at any moment."

"That will be all right when the proper time comes," assured Chris. "Keep yourself in check till then."

Then he turned to Old Rube, with:

"Hain't we better drop it, Rube? That Mexican is bound to get away for the present, and we are simply wasting our time and ruining our animals."

"Kirec, lad."

Then the foreman of the Robinson Ranch gave a cry which quickly brought the pursuers to a halt. To their surprise, Pablo also halted and sat watching them, still plainly revealed by the light of the dying fire.

"Looker ther cuss!" snorted Rube. "I wish I hed er Winchester!"

"If you did—"

"Ef I did, I'd send a bullet through his head ur bring down thet critter o' his'n! I'd guv 'e roun' pile fer thet thar hoss! It's ther best four-legged beast I've seen in one long time!"

After a few moments of consultation, the cowboys turned back toward the Diamond Ranch. Pablo still sat silently in his saddle and watched them. How long he remained thus they could not tell, for the light of the dying

fire soon declined so much that they were unable to see him when they looked back; but they knew, if he was watching, he could still see them.

When they reached the ranch they were told that Orson Colfax had been carried inside and also that his injury was by no means fatal.

"Critter jest creased him," explained Jack Kipper. "Bullet plowed 'long side his head. Ef 'tad bin an inch ter ther left, it w'd 'a' bin good-by Colfax. It wuz one mighty lucky thing fer ther boss!"

"Is he all right?"

"Yep, he's kem round."

"How does he 'pear?"

"Sorter dazed like. He said he'd like ter see you 'fore you went back ter Robinson's."

"Did you tell him we wuz arter ther varmint thet tried ter salt him for keeps?"

"Yep."

"W'at did he say?"

"Said he hoped you'd ketch him an' fotch him back fer him ter git at."

Round-up Rube left the saddle and entered the ranch, finding Colfax on a rude bed, a bloody bandage around his head. The Tenderfoot Rancher started as soon as he saw the foreman of the Robinson Ranch, eagerly demanding:

"Have you caught that wretch?"

The bow-legged cowboy shook his head.

"Sorry, Mister Colfax, but ther critter wuz mounted on er better boss then any o' us, an' he got clean off."

A look of genuine disappointment clouded Orson Colfax's face, and he sunk back with a moan of mingled pain and rage.

"I will have bith life to pay for thith," he declared. "He meant to kill me, thir!"

"Hain't nary doubt 'bout thet, an' it's jest er plum' wonder he didn't succeed. But I reckon you meant ther same dost fer him, eh?"

"I fired at bith heart, thir, and I am not in the habit of mithing. I learned to thoot under one of the betht markthmen in the country."

"We hev come to ther conclusion that ther varmint wears some kind o' er protection thet wards off the bullets. You saw us when we peppered at ther Black Phenix as he 'peared at Robinson's, an' you know that it seemed not er bullet tetcht him. Wal, I'm goin' ter say this: Ef I didn't plink at least three lead pills bunt erg'in' his buzzum, I hope I'll never pull trigger erg'in'! An' t'other boys done ther same. Yit he sot thar like he wuz made o' iron. You had er squar' chance at Pablo, an' you say you never miss, yit you didn't knock him outer ther saddle. We follered arter him an' j-st nacherally rained lead all over ther critter, yit he rode off as unconcerned as er jinny-dad-dern, b'gosh! Now, w'at do ye make o' thet, Colfax?"

"I weckon that ith plain enough," was the Tenderfoot Rancher's reply. "It ith not werry often I am dethieved, but, thir, I am free to confeth that thith fellow did dethieve me. Mistah Wobinthon thaid he thought Pablo and thith Black Phenix wath one and the thame, and, b'Jove, thir, I think tho mythelf now!"

"An' I reckon thar hain't nary doubt but thet is ther clean underdult'rated truth," nodded Rube. "W'en we put our claws outer ther Greaser, we'll hev Black Phenix in our grip. Cy Robinson will most likely send out a party of searchers in the morning. Kin he look fer any aid from you?"

"Yeth, thir! I will thend him every man I can potbibly thapare."

"Bully fer you, Colfax!" and Rube held out one horny hand. "You hev got better stuff in ye then I thought at ther fu'st. You will bold yer own out hyer arter all, I reckon!"

The Tenderfoot Rancher smiled faintly at this praise and allowed the bluff cowboy to give him a warm grasp.

A few moments later, Rube joined his comrades, and those who were to return to the Robinson Ranch were soon on their way, the cowboys of the Diamond having assured them they would need no aid in looking after the glowing ruins.

The return was made at a slow pace, the cowboys discussing the events of the night and expressing their various opinions. On one point they seemed unanimous: Pablo Pajario was Black Phenix the Scourge. There seemed not the least doubt about that.

But the surprising events of the night were not over, by any means.

The party was yet at least two miles from the Robinson Ranch when a mounted cowboy came dashing madly up to them. As soon as he was sure they were friends, he shouted:

"More deviltry, pard! Satan is holding a jubilee to-night for sure!"

"W'at is it now?" snarled Round-up Rube, who was in anything but an agreeable mood.

"W'at in ther name o' sin has happened, now?"

"T'other gal's clean gone!" was the amazing declaration.

"W'at?" fairly howled the foreman. "Not ther boss's gal?"

"Ther very same."

"But whar's she gone?—how? I don't understand it."

"No more duz anybody else. She's gone, an' thet's all we know 'bout it. Ther boss sent me hot-foot fer you fellers."

The two miles which intervened between them and the ranch were quickly covered, and as they rode along, the cowboy who had brought them word of this second disappearance was plied with questions. However, they could obtain very little satisfaction from him. He had told all he knew. Miss Nina had disappeared and could not be found, but no man seemed to know how it had happened.

Everything was in confusion when they reached the ranch. The second calamity seemed to have driven Cy Robinson crazy, and it was with the utmost difficulty he could be restrained from doing himself or some one else injury.

"Gone clean daft fer ther time," muttered Rube. "He'll cool off by an' by, an' then thar'll be er hot hunt, you bet!"

Assisted by Fred Anthrop and Chris Comstock, the foreman began his investigations, but they made very unsatisfactory progress. About all that could be discovered was that Nina had been seen moving about within the ranch and no one had noticed she left it. Happening to want her for something, her father was unable to find her. Quick to take the alarm, he had set others to searching, but the only result had been a confirmation of his first fears that there had been more foul work.

"Derned ef I understand it!" muttered Rube, who was plainly puzzled.

"Allow me to offer a hint," said Chris Comstock, at the bow-legged cowboy's elbow.

"Sart'in, lad, sart'in."

"See if all the men are to be found."

"Then you think—w'at?"

"Nothing at present. If any one is missing—Well, I will tell you what I think then."

Without delay, the foreman made the investigation suggested, and the discovery was made that there was one man missing.

Ruck Pike could not be found.

"Look for his boss, pards," ordered Rube.

The horse was also gone.

"Thet settles it!" nodded the bow-legged cowboy.

"I am ready to tell what I think," said Chris.

"Tain't necessary, lad. Ther hull black work is plain as day. Ruck Pike wuz er new man, an' he bes turned out ter be a cursed traitor! W'en we lay han's on him, we'll hang ther skunk ter ther nearest tree, bey, pards?"

And the cry that came from the lips of the cowboys boded no good for Ruck Pike.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE RETREAT.

"Hit it, pard!" exclaimed Whisky Jim, with apparent relief—"hit it plumb on ther head! Ther boss is kerryin' er high han' ter-night. He is makin' ther fur fly in these yer parts. Holy Moses! but won't thar be some howlin'!"

"You kin gamble on it," was Nevada Mike's retort. "But ther chief knows his biz, an' he hain't workin' all this row fer nuthin'."

"Nary time. He don't work thet way. He skoops ther bood', ev'ry pop. W'en he gits through with this leetle hurl he is hevin' roun' hyer, he'll prob'ly slide fer Mexico."

"An' we'll slide with him."

"To be course we will! I don't 'low it'll be healthy fer us in these parts then."

"Wal, I reckon not!"

"W'at d'yer reckon ther boss 'll be able ter squeeze outer ole Robinson fer ther gal?"

"I hain't good at figgers, but it'll be er clean heap. Cy will hev ter kem down lib'ral."

"An' then d'yer s'pose ther boss will guv up ther gal?"

"Hard tellin'. He may take a fancy ter her an' kerry her with 'im inter Mexico."

Nell shuddered as she heard these words, but she was puzzled to understand why the ruffians should think Cy Robinson would offer a big reward for her restoration. He was nothing to her more than her host and the father of the girl whom she had learned to consider as her dearest female friend.

But one thing was certain: Fred would not

remain idle while she was in peril. Still, what could he do alone? Alone! He would not be alone. There was her father, the strange man whom she was still unable to understand—he would make every effort for her recovery. And Chris—surely she was not friendless.

Once more the kidnappers rode onward.

How long that ride lasted the tortured girl could never tell, but some time before they reached the end of the journey, the ruffians were considerate enough to remove the gag from between her aching jaws.

"Thar ye are, lady-bird!" laughed Mike. "I don't reckon thar's ary need of keepin' yer thraple from yoopin' ef ye feels like it. We hev passed clean beyend ther p'int of danger, an' you kin squeal as much as ye derned please 'thout bringin' ther dogs down outer us."

But she raised no outcry, well knowing the brutal wretch spoke the truth and she would be simply wasting her breath. Indeed, she could not have uttered a cry immediately after the gag was removed had she tried ever so hard to do so. For the time, her tongue seemed paralyzed.

"She don't seem ter keer 'bout makin' er noise," laughed Whisky Jim, coarsely. "She seems jest contented ter lay in your arms clost ter your palpertatin' heart, Michael. Thet 'pears ter be joy enough fer ther gentle critter."

"Oh, I 'low she's clean mashed on me. They all git thet way. I'm er leddy-killer, James. You might be one ef you'd only stop guzzlin' so much whisk'. Thet stuff sp'iles ther scent o' yer breath."

"I don't reckon you'll be anywhar w'en ther boss gits roun', pard. He'll be clean gone on ther leetle dear, an' your chances fer huggin' her will be over. Better 'prove ther oppertunity w'ile ye kin."

"You dastardly wretches!" came slowly from the captive maiden's lips. "You shall both answer dearly for this outrage!"

"By gol!" cried Jim. "She's got grit! W'y, some gals'd be whimperin' an' cryin'."

"Reckon she hain't built of thet kind of stuff."

The robbers' retreat was finally reached, and the girl felt certain she was carried into a cavern. Although the gag had been removed, the bandage was still kept over her eyes. Through the cloth she caught a gleam of firelight, and then she was placed upon her feet.

"Stan' stiddy, honey," advised Whisky Jim. "Keep cool erbout two jiffs, an' I'll hev ye free an' git thet rag off yer face."

With a knife he cut the bonds which confined her feet and hands, and then she snatched the blindfold from her face.

As she had suspected, she was in a cavern, and near at hand a cheerful fire was burning in a sort of natural fireplace. The light of this fire was all the illumination provided. It showed the bare, rugged walls of stone on three sides, and the black darkness of the cave on the other.

As the girl removed the blindfold, a cry of amazement burst from the lips of the whisky tough, for he then saw her face plainly for the first time that night! In the room at the ranch he had leaped upon her from behind, and from that moment till he was clear of the building he had kept his eyes about him to make sure he was not running into a trap. In the darkness of the little grove he came near looking at the captive's face by the aid of a lighted match, but the sudden alarm at the ranch had caused him to give up his purpose. Now he was filled with consternation and amazement.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

Nevada Mike came hurrying up, inquiring:

"W'at is it, pard?"

"Locker thar!" and Jim pointed at their captive. "W'at double-derned fools we hev made of ourselves. Thet hain't ole Robinson's gal a tall!"

Mike took one look at Nell's face, then he burst into a torrent of profanity that made the poor girl shudder with fear and disgust. Whisky Jim seemed too astounded to even swear.

Suddenly Mike turned furiously on his partner.

"You thunderin' idiot!" he howled. "W'at a blamed jackass you hev made of yerself! Oh, w'at er fool you be!"

"You're in it, too," mumbled Jim.

"How's thet? Not by er blamed sight, I hain't! You wuz ther one who went inter ther room an' scooped ther gal. I didn't even git one leetle peep at her face tell jest now."

"No more did I. I wuz lookin' out fer my own skin."

"But you must hev see'd her w'en you grappled her in her room, you blunderin' fool!"

"Never looked at her phiz."

"You wuz drunk!" stormed Mike. "I tole

ye you wuz drinkin' too much! Now ther very ole devil'll be ter pay, an' we'll ketch it hot from ther boss!"

The two wretches looked into each other's pale faces and saw dread and fear plainly written there. What would follow the chief's discovery that they had made such an unpardonable blunder?

Nevada Mike's hand crept toward a knife, as he once more denounced his partner in crime as a fool, and Whisky Jim also made a movement toward a weapon. To the captive it seemed that the ruffians would be flying at each other's throats in another moment.

Suddenly several hooded figures appeared in the background. They were men of Black Phenix's band, and they had been attracted to the spot by the loud words of the two ruffians. One advanced and stepped between the angry men, saying sternly:

"What does this mean? Why are you quarreling and snarling like dogs over a bone?"

There was a moment of hesitation, then both of the kidnappers hastened to explain. The disguised outlaw listened to their jumbled statements in grim silence for a time, but finally said:

"I understand. You have made a blunder and brought the wrong girl here. Well, I am sorry for you. This is your first job, and you have made a botch of it. It will go hard with you, unless the chief is in a milder mood than usual. You had better make the best of it, and keep close watch of the girl you have brought here. It is probable the chief will be here before morning."

Which was small consolation for the kidnappers.

The hooded outlaws disappeared, leaving Jim and Mike alone with their captive.

The ruffians did not offer to renew their quarrel, but Mike turned on the girl, snarling:

"Wal, you've got us inter a poorty scrape, I swar! But I don't reckon you'll git off any easier by it. You're better lookin' then t'other one, an' ther boss may take a shine ter ye. Ef he duz, thet'll save our bacon. You'd best sot down an' take it easy."

There was nothing else to be done, and as Nell was an unusually brave girl, she complied without making any fuss.

Jim and Mike threw themselves on the hard ground and stared silently into the fire, their crime-hardened faces wearing anything but pleasant looks.

And thus the hours wore away.

Suddenly a shrill whistle sounded three times in succession, in a distant part of the cave, at which the two men by the fire started up and listened anxiously. There was a brief pause, then two more sharp blasts sounded clearly.

"It's ther boss!" gasped the two ruffians, in a breath, their swarthy faces becoming pale.

CHAPTER X.

THE PARDS AT WORK.

BREATHLESSLY the two ruffians awaited the appearance of the Black Phenix. After a few moments a dark-clothed, hooded figure advanced out of the darkness, and paused within the circle of firelight. Not a word did he speak as he regarded the girl, whose eyes flashed defiantly, and his satellites, who cringed and cowered before him. There was something ominous in his silence.

Whisky Jim opened his mouth to make an explanation, but the hooded man lifted one hand with a gesture that immediately silenced the ruffian, and caused him to shiver with apprehension.

At length the silent one turned his black eyes upon his chosen tools, and through the openings in the hood they saw his orbs flashing in a manner which seemed to speak ill for them. Then the strange leader of outlaws turned and walked away into the darkness, still declining to utter a word.

Jim and Mike looked at each other in astonishment.

"W'at's it mean?" gasped the former,

"Wal, now, you tell!" retorted Mike. "I dunno whether he's goin' ter let us off easy, or has gone ter prepare fer ther funeral. It may be one, but derned ef it don't look like 'twuz t'other!"

A day spent in fruitless searching for the kidnapped girls was approaching its close. With the first peep of daylight Cy Robinson and his men were in the saddle, and they scarcely dismounted for a moment throughout the day.

Orson Colfax kept his word by sending a detachment of his men to assist in the hunt, also offering an expression of his regret at being un-

able to take part himself. Pablo's bullet incapacitated him for so great an exertion.

As night approached, and no clew to the fate of the missing girls was found, Cy Robinson showed signs of despair. Round-up Rube did his level best to cheer his employer, but the rancher was despondent.

Chris Comstock and Fred Anthrop were with one of the smaller parties of searchers, and the young cowboy's words did much to keep up the spirits of his friends. Chris seemed very confident of finally finding the girls and punishing the kidnappers, but to tell the truth, he was far from being so confident as he appeared. He knew the reputation of the Black Phenix, and he believed the outlaw as cunning as bold, a fact proven by his past operations.

Toward sunset a horseman was sighted on a distant swell. The man was sitting silently in the saddle and seemed viewing the sweep of rolling plain before him. By the aid of a field-glass he carried, Chris made out that the horseman was Rodney Welland.

"It is Nell's father," he said. "Fred, it is our duty to see if we can approach him and induce him to go back to the ranch with us. Of course he has not tasted a mouthful of food today. Deranged as he is, he may wander about till he perishes of starvation."

So the two horsemen left the others and rode toward that silent horseman. As they drew nearer, they decided he was watching them approach. When within earshot, they bailed him, waving their hats above their heads.

As if alarmed by the act, Old Rattlebrain reined his horse round and fled from them, heading toward a distant range of low hills. The young men were taken by surprise at first, but Chris quickly cried:

"Come on, Fred! we will try to overtake him. The chances are he has ridden that horse till it will fail to prove a match even for our own overworked animals. Come on!"

Fred needed no urging. Giving his horse free rein and a touch of the spur, he kept close at his comrade's side.

The horse which Welland bestrode proved fresher than they had hoped he would, and, although he did not draw from them, he surely held his own. Now and then the strange man would look back to ascertain if his pursuers were gaining.

"He takes us for enemies," said Fred. "Let's call to him again."

But Chris counseled against such a course.

"We made a mistake by doing so before," he asserted. "That was what alarmed him. Had we remained silent, I fancy we should have had no trouble in approaching him."

Slowly the great red sun sunk beyond the far distant mountains, which seemed to thrust their peaks up out of the plain. By the time they reached the low hills the day-god entirely had disappeared.

"It will be dark in a short time," said Chris. "If we overtake Mr. Welland at all, we shall have to do so soon."

Within the hills they lost sight of the deranged man several times. Finally, they came to a place where he might have chosen either of two courses, but the nature of the ground and the gathering twilight prevented Chris from determining which he had taken.

The young cowboy quickly explained how by separating they could follow both courses and meet at a certain point without any danger of missing each other. So they separated for the time, Chris turning to the right and Fred to the left.

The Easterner had not proceeded far when the sound of shots and shouts came plainly to his ears, telling him there was trouble of some kind ahead.

Giving his horse the spur and dropping the rein to produce his revolvers, Fred forged onward, seized by a desire to take a hand in the battle, if battle it was.

He soon came upon a scene of wild work. Rodney Welland's horse lay dead on the ground while the deranged man was battling bare-handed with eight foes!

Despite the terrible odds, Old Rattlebrain seemed to be holding his own, dealing terrible blows right and left, sending the men staggering to the ground almost as fast as they could get upon their feet. And, high above their shouts and oaths rose the strange man's wild laugh, for he actually seemed to delight in the terribly unequal struggle in which he was engaged.

Straight toward the writhing knot of men dashed Fred Anthrop, but he was unable to use his weapons, fearing he should hit Nellie Welland's father instead of his foes.

One of the men turned and clutched the bit of

Fred's horse just as the animal was upon them, setting the creature back on its haunches by a strong surge.

"Easy thar!" snarled the man. "W'at in blazes are you doin', you fool!"

"Coming to take a hand in this little game!" was the reply, as the speaker left the saddle for the ground.

"Yer're er derned—"

The fellow finished with an oath of delight, as he obtained a fair view of Fred's face and recognized him, despite the murky twilight.

"Ha!" cried the Easterner, also recognizing the man who had checked his dash. "So it is you, Whisky Jim!"

"You bet! An' now I'll hev er chance ter settle ther leetle score erg'in' you. Come ter my arms, honey!"

In another moment the two men were locked in each other's grasp, struggling for the supremacy. The whisky tough soon found he had made an error in thinking he could easily handle the tenderfoot, and Fred Anthrop proved himself something like a match for the desperado.

But Jim was soon aided by one of his companions, and, though he fought desperately to the last, Fred was made a prisoner, being lashed securely to the trunk of a tree.

Old Rattlebrain had been knocked senseless by a blow on the head, and the ruffianly gang was triumphant.

CHAPTER XI.

WHISKY JIM TRIUMPHANT.

THE desperadoes vented their satisfaction in loud shouts.

Darkness had settled swiftly over the bit of low hill land, and the order was given to build a small fire, that they might be able to see what they were about, a thing which was quickly done.

As the dry grass and brushwood caught to blaze up merrily, Fred Anthrop's face was revealed, but his foes saw nothing but defiance and scorn written on it. Not a sign of fear was there.

Old Rattlebrain began to stir slightly, his breathing being hoarse and painful, like that of a man who is strangling. His eyes slowly opened, but there was a vacant stare in their depths and he did not seem to realize his situation. Mechanically he watched the moving figures of the desperadoes, all of whom, with the exception of Whisky Jim, had disguised themselves with the black hoods of the cattle-lifters, which was enough to reveal the fact that they were of Black Phenix's band.

The whisky tough did not seem to think it necessary to assume a disguise, as he had already been recognized by Fred. With his arms akimbo and his hands on his hips, he watched the men building the fire, now and then casting a triumphant glance at the young man bound in a sitting posture with his back against the trunk of a tree.

As the fire blazed up brightly, Whisky Jim approached the young captive, a horrible grin on his liquor-branded face.

"Got ye," he chuckled—"got ye fast an' tight, kid! An' now hes kim my time ter settle scores with ye."

"You are triumphant just now," spoke Fred, calmly, "but your day is not far away. I am sure your race is pretty near an end."

"Wal, ef thet is so—which I doubt most mightily—you will never live ter see the wind-up, younker. That is some satisfaction ter me."

Jim squatted like a huge dog settling on its haunches, grinning fiendishly into the face of the helpless man.

"You made er dashed fool of yerself, boy," he asserted, taking a huge bite from a plug of black tobacco. "You run yer nose right inter ther trap. Comin' ter help Ole Rattlebrain, eh? Wal, thet ole cuss tuck it inter his head that he wuz goin' ter capter ther hull of us single-handed, but he tackled er mighty big job, an' now we've got him trussed up so he'll keep as long's we want him."

To this Fred made no reply.

"Know w'at I'm goin' to do with ye, boy?" the tough continued, working his jaws vigorously and talking as he chewed. "Wal, I s'pose ye 'members ther time thet ye smacked me one with yer juke? I tuck er sollum oath then thet I'd git even with ye ur bu'st, an' now my time hes kem. I hed ye oncet before whar I c'd wipid ye out, but ye slipped through my fingers. I don't reckon thar's any danger of thet now."

"But afore I wipes ye out, thar are er few things as I wants ter tell ye, 'cause I know they'll make ye feel good. Oh, I'm so tender-heart-

ed! I jest love ter see er man feel good in his dyin' moments, I do! W'en er man thet's all riled up kicks ther bucket, thar's er chance thet he don't go straight ter Glory—t'other place is ap' ter ketch him; but w'en er man is in good sperrits an' feelin' r'al good, then he hes er poorty good show of settin' hoof on ther Shinin' Shore.

"Now, you w'u'dn't think I'd hev so much consideration fer them things, w'u'd ye, boy? Ye know thar's suthin' in ther Gospel Book thet tells 'bout lovin' yer neighbor like he wuz yer own mammy. I heard er preacher sharp tellin' 'bout it once. Wal, thet's ther way I love you, boy; thet's ther way I hev loved ye ever since ye swiped me! Oh, hain't I longed ter fold ye in my arms!

"But, I'm kinder runnin' off my subjec' like. This yere hain't w'at I wuz goin' ter tole ye. I wuz goin' ter speak of ther leetle gal as ye are all dead broke up over. I 'lowed it'd be er great conselation ter ye ter know she wuz safe in my han's. I wuz ther feller w'at scopped her, boy, an' she—"

"You dog!" hissed Fred, straining vainly at the bonds which held him. "You dastardly wretch!"

Whisky Jim chuckled with delight, but quickly changed the sound to a whimpering imitation of a sob.

"Oh, you can't mean me!" he gurgled, "you can't! Them hain't sech names as one w'u'd call er dear frien'. An' I am so considerate! Oh, no, no, no, ye can't mean me!"

"If I had my hands on your throat—if I only did!"

"Want ter caress me, do ye?" grinned the rascal, showing his yellow teeth as he continued to work his jaws. "You are beginnin' ter love me fer my thoughtfulness. He, he, he!"

"But, speakin' of ther gal, she's er daisy, boy! She jest ketches my eye! Ye see I made a sorter mistook w'en I took her, fer I wuz arter ole Cy Robinson's gal; but, it all kem out right in ther en', fer one of ther lads brung in ther right gal. Thet satisfied ther chief, an' he hes kinder turned t'other 'un over ter me—says she's mine ter do as I durned please with."

"If you harm her—my God!—if you harm her—"

"W'at ef I do? You will be planted by thet time, so it won't be ary blamed thing ter you! But, I hain't goin' ter harm ther leetle dear, boy; I think too much of her fer thet. I'm jest goin' ter keep her snug an' safe. W'en ther boss is done with his business in these parts, I 'low he'll take er slide inter Ole Mexico, an' Jim'll go with him. I shall take ther gal erlong. Down thar we'll be clean beyend pursuit, an' I'll hev ther black-eyed beauty ter take keer of er leetle nest of my own—er leetle cottage 'way down in ther lan' of sunshine and flowers. How do ye like ther picter, boy?"

Fred Anthrop's eyes gleamed like living coals and his face was hard-set. Tortured as he was by the taunting words of the brutal wretch, had he been free and possessed a weapon, he would have struck the tough dead without a thought of mercy.

Jim read all this in the young man's face and eyes; he saw how acute the helpless youth's tortures were, and he laughed harshly with fiendish satisfaction.

"Now you can't say I hain't ole consideration," he continued. "Knowin' that you hed only er short time ter live, I thought I'd tell ye how ther gal ye love wuz goin' ter be keered fer, thinkin' thet w'u'd make yer death er happy one. You may hev thunk I was hinder heartless, but arter this you c'u'dn't thunk so ef you wuz goin' ter live right erlong in this yere wicked worl', which ye hain't."

Several of the hooded outlaws were standing around the fire, apparently waiting for Whisky Jim to complete his business with the captive. One or two of the band were feeding the fire with dead grass and dry brush, so the flames kept up a bright light all the while.

Where was Chris Comstock? Fred asked himself the question, vainly trying to peer into the dense darkness which now lurked in the little valley. The young cowboy must have heard the shots, and it seemed as if sufficient time had elapsed for him to appear. Fred had not a doubt but that the daring fellow would make a bold and desperate attempt at his rescue, for he well knew Cowboy Chris's dashing nature.

Rodney Welland was mumbling and muttering to himself, his eyes rolling and his appearance being that of a person about to break into a frenzy.

The Black Hoods stirred uneasily, and one of them addressed Whisky Jim:

"Better cut it short, pard. If these fellows

have friends in this vicinity they may come down on us."

"Didn't you say Cy Robinson an' his men hed turned fer ther ranch?"

"They surely did; still here is one of the party."

"I reckon he tuck it inter his head ter foler Ole Crazy thar."

"Others may have done the same."

"Then why wusn't they with him? Jest you keep cool, pard; I reckon thar hain't no more of ther critters within miles of these hills."

Whisky Jim turned once more to the young Easterner, a fiendish light flickering in his blood-shot eyes, his hand producing a wicked-looking knife. Running his thumb along the keen edge of the bright blade, the wretch went on:

"Now jest mark how considerate of your feelin's I be, boy. I w'u'dn't use er dull knife on yer, fer thet'd be sure ter hurt bad. This yere instrument is sharp as er razzer, an' w'en I pulls it 'cross yer throat it will tickle ye so ye will laugh out loud with ginnywine delight. It'll make ye think of ther time ther gals uster chuckle ye under ther chin. Oh, won't it be fun!"

Fred fully realized the murderous-minded wretch would indeed cut his throat without even a shudder. The young tenderfoot's situation was desperate in the extreme. Even if he would have stooped to appeal to Whisky Jim's companions—and he would not—there was little hope that the men would interfere. They were criminals of the worst type and fit associates for the ruffian with the knife.

The young man's only hope was that Chris would arrive in time. He strained his ears to see if he could catch the sound of a distant hoof-beat, but the far-away hoot of an owl was all he heard.

"Oh, thar hain't no use fer ye ter think of axin' them fellers will they help ye," asserted the whisky tough, thinking the captive was about to make an appeal to the Black Hoods in the background. They'll never put their fingers inter my pie, an' ef I do a good job in polishin' ye off, it'll only show 'em I am fit to be classed as one of ther best members of ther ban'. You hev got ter croak, younker."

The wretch took a savage delight in torturing the helpless young man.

Suddenly Fred turned to Old Rattlebrain, crying:

"Rodney Welland, Rodney Welland! arouse, arouse! You are in the hands of your enemies!"

"Who calls me?" demanded the deranged man, speaking in a deep tone.

"It is I, a friend! Your daughter is in danger! She is a captive in the hands of these wretches!"

"My daughter, my daughter! She is a little child; they would not harm her. No, no; you are wrong. She is far, far from here; she is at home with Nancy. But where is my home—can you tell?"

Whisky Jim laughed, sneeringly.

"Ther old cuss is clean daft. He don't 'member nary blamed thing thet has happened fer y'ars. Ef he did, he is trussed up so thar hain't nary bit of show fer him ter bust loose."

But, Fred was not so sure of that. He had seen some exhibitions of Old Rattlebrain's wonderful strength which convinced him there could be no limit set upon the astonishing power of the deranged.

"Time is humpin' erlong after ther same ole sort," observed Jim. "We can't stay hyer all night, an' so I'll hev ter finish this yere leetle job. I hate ter act 'zif I wuz in a too mighty big rush, fer I 'lows thet hain't perlite; but thar are times w'en we can't stan' on ceremony, an' this am one of ther 'casions. Still I'll hev ter guv ye time ter say over yer pra'rs an' chant yer death-song, like ev'ry brave warrior duz. So it won't bother ye, I will leave ye fer jest erbout a minute. They oughter guv ye plenty of time fer gittin' ready ter be helped off. W'en I kem back, I'm goin' ter slit yer woozle, an' thet's ther ragged-edged truth."

He arose and turned away to speak with one of the men who had been watching the singular scene, having his arms folded across his breast.

Fred instantly turned to Rodney Welland, speaking earnestly:

"You can break loose if you try, Mr. Welland," he declared. "Your life depends on it—your life, my life, the life of your daughter! Break loose and set me free! There is not a moment to be lost! In a short time we both shall be murdered!"

Something like a light of comprehension filled the deranged man's restless eyes, but he muttered:

"Murdered, murdered! Yes, he tried to murder me! He shot me and then robbed me of my money! But, I was not dead—I still live!"

He was thinking of the tragedy which turned his brain.

"Yes, I live," he went on, while Fred Anthrop strained despairingly at his bonds. "I seem to remember that I hunted him down. I found him—he died at my feet! It is like a dream, yet I almost fancy it is true. And my child—was she there? It almost seems that way."

"She was there," panted Fred, giving up the hopeless attempt. "She is a young lady now. It has been years since you left her a child at home. She had been searching for you, and she found you at last. Now she is again a captive in the hands of enemies. Her fate depends on you. Break loose! break loose!"

As if these panting words had aroused him to something like a realization of his position, Rodney Welland suddenly struggled to a sitting posture and glared around. Then a wild laugh came from his bearded lips—a laugh that caused the outlaws to start and whirl in alarm.

"Yip, yip, yip!"

It was the ringing cowboy yell, and it came from the lips of Chris Comstock! Down through the darkness, heading straight toward the fire, charged the young cattleman, his bridle-rein swinging loose on the neck of his horse, a revolver in each hand.

As soon as he appeared the cowboy's weapons began to speak with a rapidity that was astonishing!

CHAPTER XII.

BURIED BENEATH THE SLIDE.

THE outlaws were taken by surprise, and sudden consternation seized upon them, for they knew not how large the attacking party was. Their alarm was increased by the cry that came from Chris Comstock's lips:

"Here they are, pard! Come on, come on!"

The ruse was successful, for the Black Hoods fancied a large party of cowboys were close behind the man whose either hand was spitting fire and whose bullets were whistling around their heads.

To increase the excitement, Old Rattlebrain, seized by a sudden fury, rent his bonds asunder and sprung to his feet, his wild laugh echoing through the night once more.

With a yell of pain, one of the outlaws threw up his hands and fell heavily to the ground, one of Chris Comstock's bullets having found a target.

Seized by an unreasoning terror, the fallen man's comrades fled precipitately into the darkness, quickly vanishing from sight.

Flowing up the ground with its hoofs, the young cowboy's horse came to a halt beside the fire, its master leaping from the saddle.

"On hand, pard!" laughed the reckless fellow, springing forward with a knife in his grasp. "I'll have you free in a jiff, then we will scoot before those imps of Satan recover their balance and seek to discover the number of their assailants."

"You were just in time," assured Fred. "Unless Whisky Jim lied, I had less than a minute to live."

"Whisky Jim! Is that dastardly dog here?"

"He was here, and he told me he was the one who kidnapped Nell."

"Well, if he falls into the hands of any of our men, he will be sure to decorate the limb of the first tree they can reach."

Fred was quickly set at liberty.

"One of those fellows escaped on my horse," he said. "I am out an animal, for which I shall have to account to Mr. Robinson."

"You were in Cy Robinson's service, and he will never think of considering such a loss."

Welland stooped and lifted the body of the fallen outlaw and strode away into the darkness, not even uttering a word or casting a glance toward his companions.

Fred made a significant motion, and both the young men followed the demented man, Chris leading his horse.

For a long distance Old Rattlebrain strode along through the darkness at a tireless gait, paying no heed to those behind him. At length, he halted at the foot of a steep descent, crouching beside the body of the now softly moaning outlaw, but still remaining silent.

Chris and Fred paused also, and, leaving his horse standing close at hand, the young cowboy accompanied his pledged pard to Welland's side.

Fred touched the strange man on the shoulder, saying:

"What are you going to do with him, Mr. Welland?" pointing at the outlaw.

Old Rattlebrain shook his head slowly, seeming undecided about that point, but he still refused to speak.

"It is our duty to see if the unfortunate rascal is seriously injured," declared Fred, turning to Chris.

"That is so," was the instant agreement; "and if he is not fatally injured, it is our duty to hold fast to him till justice can settle his case. Perhaps we may be able to pinch the truth from him."

They bent over the man and removed the hood from his head. He was conscious and began to beg for mercy.

"Strike a match, Fred," said Chris, "and we will see how hard he is hit."

Fred did as directed, and the cowboy examined the man's wound. When he had done this, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and calked the bullet-hole with it to retard the steady loss of blood. Telling Old Rattlebrain to watch the fellow close, Chris drew his pard aside.

"How is it?" asked Fred.

"He has got it pretty hard, but there is no reason that I can see why the wound should be fatal."

"Then you will not have his life on your hands?"

"I trust not."

"But what are you going to tell him?"

"I want to pump him, and I am going to make him believe his chances are decidedly small."

"You are going to attempt to make him betray his comrades?"

"Yes. If we can get the truth from his lips, we may be able to quickly save the girls and destroy this dastardly band of robbers."

"That is true."

They returned to the spot where Welland was silently crouching beside the wounded man.

"What is it, pard?" asked the unfortunate wretch, faintly. "Am I booked for a funeral?"

"Well, you are hard hit," confessed Chris.

"But is there a chance for me to pull through?"

"I think there is," was the candid confession.

The man seemed to revive somewhat at that.

"You hain't foolin' me?" he eagerly asked.

"You are not telling me this for some game?"

"I am telling you what I truly believe. But I cannot see why it should please you."

"You can't? Well, do you think I am anxious to kick the bucket?"

"I don't see how you are going to escape it."

"But you jest said there was a chance for me! What do you mean anyway?"

"I mean just this," and Chris crouched lower, so he could look the fellow fairly in the eyes, despite the darkness—"I mean that I should bless my lucky stars if the wound were fatal, providing I were in your shoes. It is a great deal better and more satisfactory death to die than to stretch hemp."

A low cry came from the wounded man's lips; he understood the cowboy's meaning at last.

"Oh, but I hain't done anything that means hanging—indeed, I hain't!" he falteringly protested. "You can't hang a man for nothing, pard."

"You are one of the Black Phenix's followers. Stop! I know you would deny it; but, what do you take us for—fools? It will be folly for you to lie about it, and so you may as well tell the truth. That is the only course that will avail you anything."

"How are you going to prove I am one of Black Phenix's men?"

"We have proof enough. We are convinced ourselves, and we can easily convince others. Do not waste your time by beating around the bush."

For a few moments the outlaw was silent, then he doggedly asked:

"Wal, jest what is it that you want, anyhow?"

"We want you to peach."

"You want me to give my pards away?"

"Just that!"

"And if I refuse?"

"I will see that you are hanged for your foolishness!"

"Wal, go ahead with your fun! I'm still as a clam."

This was not exactly what the young cowboy had expected, but he did not reveal the fact by any outward sign. When he next spoke his voice was cold and metallic. In a few brief words he painted anything but a pleasant picture for the wounded man to contemplate; he described the horrors of the fate before the unlucky bandit; he held the noose dangling before

the Black Hood's mental vision. A cold sweat broke out upon the forehead of the wicked wretch and he shuddered in spite of himself.

"All this you shall suffer if you refuse to peach on your pards," Chris concluded. "You cannot escape it, for you need expect nothing like mercy when you fall into the hands of Cy Robinson. There is only one way open by which you may hope for life."

"And what is that? Will you pledge your word to release me when I have told you where Black Phenix's retreat is? Will you let me go free at once?"

"No, for you might lie to us. The chances are you would. I imagine it is as natural for you to lie as to breathe. We would hold you prisoner till we were sure you had told the truth."

"And then wipe me out anyway. I am not the fool you take me for, pards."

"You will be a bigger fool than I took you for if you do not talk, for I did think you would care a little about your own life. But I am not going to dally with you. If you will not confess, we will pack you on the back of my horse and take you to the Robinson Ranch. There you will have to deal with old Cy Robinson, and he will force the truth from your lips, if he has to give you a taste of the Inferno. You will wish you had never been born if he gets at you."

The man seemed to hesitate, and Chris added impatiently:

"Come, come! We have no time to frolic away! It is many miles to the Robinson Ranch, and we will have to be moving at once. Make your choice: either tell us the truth now and here, or face Cy Robinson and the noose."

"Well, perhaps I had better peach now; but if you do not wipe out the chief with the rest of the band, he will surely kill me for turning traitor to save my own neck."

"Cy Robinson has taken an oath to destroy the Black Phenix, and he is a man who always keeps—Hal! what's that?"

A few loose stones and a small amount of dirt came rattling down from above, causing three of the men to start to their feet. The outlaw partially struggled up, as the others dashed out from the base of the precipitous slope. A strange, rushing roar came from above.

"A landslide! a landslide!"

The words came in a shriek from the outlaw's lips, as he saw his companions of a moment before disappear in the darkness. The roaring sound grew louder and the advance couriers of the landslide rained about his ears. He struggled to his feet, stumbled, sunk on his knees, his hands upraised appealing to the heavens he had so often blasphemed, his last wild cry ringing through the night to be heard even above the roar of the avalanche!

Then a tumbling mass of earth, stones, boulders and debris shot down upon him, and he was forever buried from the sight of human eyes!

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK PHENIX AND THE CAPTIVE BIRDS.

SHORTLY after the appearance of the outlaw chief in the cave, Ruck Pike brought in the second captive, Cy Robinson's daughter. The treacherous cowboy had hired with Robinson that he might be a spy in the rancher's household, and, finding the chief's orders had gone amiss—for he was conversant with them—and the wrong girl had been carried away, he ventured to kidnap the other.

Nina was conducted to her captive friend as soon as the cave was reached, and the two girls threw themselves into each other's arms, the rancher's daughter bursting into tears.

Brave little Nell held the weeping girl close to her warm heart, resolutely keeping back the tears which sought to dim the luster of her own dark eyes. Into Nina's ears she murmured soft words of consolation, almost forgetting for the time that her position was as bad as that of her friend.

The two desperadoes, Jim and Mike, were still lolling in front of the fire, which they replenished occasionally from a mass of wood near at hand. As may be imagined, the appearance of Nina greatly relieved their feelings and filled them with delight.

"Reckon this saves our bacon, pard," chuckled Jim. "Ther boss has got both gals now, an' he can't kick very hard."

"Mebbe he won't want but one."

"Then he kin give t'other ter me. Leetle Black-Eyes is clean grit. No snuffin' an' sneezin' 'bout her! Some might like t'other best, but she's too much of er doll fer me. Black-Eyes is er beauchy, an' I'll jest be glad ter take her an' take keer of her."

"You might fine her er mighty tough leetle critter ter break inter harness. She's got claws."

"Wal, I'd break her in ur break her neck. You needn't worry 'bout that part of it, pard."

If Nell heard the words of the two ruffians, she paid no heed. Leading Nina to a place where they could sit down, she still held the weeping girl in her arms, as she softly murmured:

"Cry to your heart's relief, my dear friend. You will feel the better for it. The clouds are dark to-day, but to-morrow the sun will be shining again. We must put our trust in the friends we know will do everything in their power to find and save us."

When Nina was calmer she told how she had fallen into the hands of the treacherous cowboy, having stepped out of the ranch a moment to get a breath of fresh air, feeling faint from working over the wounded men. Pike had approached her with some excuse, quickly throwing a thick cloth over her head and suffocating her into insensibility. When she returned to consciousness she was far away on the plain, held upon the back of a swiftly-galloping horse, which bore the double burden of captor and captive.

Then Nell told of her own capture.

After awhile one of the hooded outlaws approached and called the two toughs aside, speaking a few words to them in a low tone. Both of the men left the vicinity of the fire, and after that the girls were no longer under their surveillance, but the hooded outlaw gave them to understand they would be watched all the time, and any move that looked suspicious would be promptly checked. Still they were given the privilege of a wing of the cavern, a large portion of which was not lighted by the fire.

After some hours food was brought them. Nina had no appetite, but Nell encouraged her to eat.

"You must eat, dear friend, if you would keep your strength, and be prepared to leave the cave when our friends come."

"But, will they ever come?"

"Of course they will! They will surely find and rescue us. Your father is a man who will not know the meaning of the word rest till his daughter is safe at the ranch once more."

"And there is Chris—"

Nell glanced swiftly at Nina, as the rancher's daughter suddenly hesitated. Nina saw that glance, and a soft blush stole over her face—a blush which betrayed her secret.

"Oh, Nina!" laughed Nell. "I never dreamed of—that! He is a brave, noble fellow, and—"

"Of course he is," swiftly interrupted the other. "And he thinks so much of Fred that he will lay down his very life to aid in your rescue, if necessary."

But, Nell was not to be deceived. She caught Nina in her arms and kissed the rancher's daughter with girlish impulsiveness, crying:

"Oh, you can't fool me! I am too old a head for that! You love Chris, and there is no way for you to get out of it. Come now; own up like a dear!"

Nina shook her head, protesting, but betrayed by her blushes and her appearance. Nell still insisted, and finally the ranchman's child coyly confessed she did care for the young cowboy "the least wee little bit."

And having been cheered somewhat, Nina helped her friend dispose of a portion of the food.

The weary hours dragged slowly by, spent by the girls in talking, sleeping and waiting—waiting. It almost seemed as if they had been there days, only catching a glimpse of a fitting hooded figure now and then, when suddenly the shrill whistle sounded through the cave once more. Three times it rung out clearly, then there was a pause, which was followed by two shorter blasts.

"It is the chief of the outlaws!" exclaimed Nell. "Black Phenix himself is coming!"

She was right, and in a short time the dreaded Scourge stood before his captives, regarding them through the twin holes in the cowl-like hood which was drawn down to his shoulders. They shrunk before this marauder who had made himself the dread of northern New Mexico.

A muffled laugh came from beneath the disguise.

"This is more than I bargained for," he confessed. "I only expected one bird, but my jolly lads captured two. Well, the more the merrier. I am having considerable amusement in the valley of the San Juan just at present."

Nell's eyes flashed, and the daring girl turned fearlessly on the chief of the cattle-lifters.

"It may be amusement for you now," she cried; "but the time will come when your fun

will have a sudden termination. It is pretty sure to end at the end of a rope."

Black Phenix seemed surprised, but in a moment he laughed again, apparently not displeased, despite the stinging words of the dauntless girl.

"A regular little spitfire, eh? Well, I must confess you are a beauty! *Caramba!* If I had not chosen the other— But I have, and I will not change. I fancy you have too much spirit for me, anyway. I have not the time to waste in breaking the spirit of a beautiful girl. One of my men made the bungling mistake of bringing you here, and now he will have to look after you. I have no desire to get my eyes scratched out."

"Which shows what a brave man you are!" came scornfully from Nell's lips. "You have changed your business—taken to stealing girls instead of cattle."

"Well, it is a slight departure from my usual line of work, I will confess; but this time it is more for revenge and for love than for gain. I have an old score against Cy Robinson, and I am in love with his daughter. I can get revenge on him and secure his daughter at the same time, thus popping over two birds at a single shot."

"Cy Robinson will see that your neck is stretched for this black work!"

"He will discover he has tackled the biggest job of his life. There are lots of them who have tried to stretch my neck, but it is not an inch longer to-day than when the Black Phenix was first heard of, four years ago."

"Braggart!"

"Thanks for the compliment! You have a sharp tongue, *senorita*, and there is danger you may injure yourself with it. I should advise you to have a care. A woman never knows how to handle a dangerous weapon."

"If I had a pistol at this moment—"

"You would make a fool of yourself, *alma mia*." (My dear.)

"I would end the career of the dastard who has caused so much trouble!"

"Then it is fortunate for me you have no pistol. I have no desire to pass over the dead range. But, I haven't time to waste in talk. I came to get a glimpse at my captive birds, and my desire has been gratified. Now I will take myself away."

"And a good riddance it will be!" flashed Nell.

At this Black Phenix laughed once more.

"You are very bold now, little one, but you will sing a different song by and by. All the same, I am free to confess I admire your spirit. While you remain with me, you shall be treated well, but I can make no promises for the time when you will fall into the hands of Whisky Jim. I should advise you to improve the present, and take no thought of the future. Eat, drink, sleep, and be prepared for a long journey. Within three days we may be on our way to Mexico. I hope to complete my revenge in that time."

"*Buenos dias, senoritas!*"

With a sweeping bow, he turned and left them, disappearing into the darkness.

"Oh, Nellie!" gasped Nina, as soon as the chief had disappeared. "How could you talk to him in that way?"

"Ho, that was nothing!" declared the plucky miss. "Do you suppose I am afraid of Pablo Pajarito?"

"Pablo Pajarito! What do you mean?"

"Didn't you recognize his voice?"

"No, the hood muffled it."

"I made an allowance for that. I confess the hood did muffle it so it sounded somewhat strange, but if that man was not Pablo Pajarito I am wretchedly mistaken!"

"Hush! Here he comes again!"

But, it was not the chief. Another one of the band approached and threw some wood upon the fire. While he was doing this, he did not even look at the girls, but they heard him distinctly say:

"Keep up courage; you shall be saved! I am your friend!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A RESTLESS RANCHMAN.

As he darted out from the base of that steep slope, hearing the increasing roar above, Cowboy Chris understood what it meant, and he fully comprehended the peril they were in. Already his horse had dashed from the dangerous vicinity, and, catching Fred Antrop by the arm, the young cattleman hurried him forward, shouting:

"Run, run! Run for life!"

At first Fred would have held back, thinking

of the outlaw, whom he understood to be in peril, although even then he could not comprehend the nature of the danger which menaced them. But Chris knew there was not a second to be lost, and he never relaxed his grip on Fred's arm for an instant.

Above that rushing roar they both heard the last wild cry of the wounded outlaw, as the miserable wretch stumbled and fell on his knees, and, although the sound smote to their hearts, they could do nothing for the sinful man, whose crimes it seemed were to be avenged by a wrathful God.

As the mass of earth and stone came pouring into the valley they were barely beyond the monster's death-clutch. Even then they were overwhelmed by a cloud of dust and flying debris. Huge boulders bounded past them, and something caught them up and dashed them to the ground. They struggled up and ran on again, but the peril was past almost in the twinkling of an eye.

Panting and breathless, they finally came to a halt.

"Well," gasped Chris, "that was what I call a tight squeeze. We escaped by the skin of our teeth."

"But that poor devil—the wounded outlaw—"

"Is dead and buried."

Fred shuddered.

"It is horrible!" he cried. "We could not save him!"

"No; we barely had time to save ourselves. As it is, we may thank our lucky stars the slide was a small one. Had it been a regular mountain avalanche, it is doubtful if our friends would have ever known our fate."

"But what started it?"

"That is a mystery no one will ever explain. It is probable it started of its own accord, as such slides usually do."

"And Mr. Welland—where is he? Can it be he is buried under that mass of earth?"

"I reckon not. He started to get away even before we did. He must have escaped."

Fred shouted the deranged man's name, and far away in the darkness a wild laugh rung out—a laugh that sounded weird and strange, and gradually sunk to silence, as if dying out in the distance.

"That was his voice. He escaped. Had we better try to find him?"

"My horse is in that direction, so we may as well move that way. The chances are we shall find neither man nor beast. If we do not find the horse, we shall have a good tramp before us in getting to the ranch."

However, the horse was soon found, and he allowed his master to easily catch him.

Then the two young men held a consultation, finally deciding the wisest thing they could do would be to start for the ranch. There was little hope of finding Rodney Welland in the darkness, and they might run against the outlaws again.

"We must get some sleep, too," said Chris; "for there will be another hard day's work before us in the morning."

"Sleep!" echoed Fred. "You may talk of sleep; but it is something I shall know nothing of this night."

"You think so now; but you will snooze off when we get settled down at the ranch. It is your duty to sleep if you want to hold out for the rest of the hunt."

So, mounted on one horse, they turned toward the ranch. The animal had been overworked that day, and it was near midnight before they reached their destination.

Cy Robinson had not retired, and the barking of his dogs brought him to the door to learn the cause.

"Ah, boys!" he cried; "you have come at last. But, where is the other horse?"

Chris explained, and the rancher listened eagerly to the story.

"By Heavens!" he cried, striking his hands together; "I believe the retreat of the dastardly gang is somewhere amid those hills!"

"I think so myself," acknowledged Chris.

"Well, to-morrow we will give the section such a scouring as it never had before. It is a pity you lost that outlaw! If I had been able to get at him, I would have wrung the truth from his lips."

One of the men about the place came forward and led Chris's horse away, and the pairs followed Cy Robinson into the ranch.

"I could not think of trying to sleep till you came in," he explained. "I almost doubt if I can sleep at all to-night. I want to be moving all the time. Boys, if we are not more fortunate to-morrow than we were to-day, I shall go mad!"

He looked as if he spoke the truth, for his cheeks were sunken, his face flushed and his eyes red as coals.

Round-up Rube came in, and for some time the four sat discussing the situation and laying plans for the morrow. While they were thus occupied, Pete, the darky, appeared, his face wearing one of the most woebegone expressions imaginable.

"Oh, dar yo' am, Masser Chris!" he exclaimed. "An' dar's Masser Fred, but I don' see nuffin' ob my pore lit'l' missy. Oh, de good Lawd sabe an' bless us! but dis am a terrible time fo' suah! Hain't plinked de banjer once dis hoel bressed day, an' dat's suttin' 'tain't happen befo' fer y'ars. I jes' completely kumfrustrated—yes, I is!"

The faithful fellow was indeed a sad-appearing object, as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Nebber fought I'd com' ter see dis yar sorrowful time w'en I tole de ole missus dat I'd look arter de lit'l' missy. Nebber fought de time'd com' w'en I didn't keep my wo'd. If lit'l' missy's nebber foun', I's jes' gwine ter kermit screwicide—I is, fo' a sollum fac'l! I jes' cayn't stan' dis sollumcolly feelin' ob lasseration; dat's w'at's de mattah wid me."

Cy Robinson finally bade the others good-night and ascended to his room, but, as he said, with no hopes of sleeping. Still, if he could get some rest, he would be better prepared for the work of the coming day. But there was no rest for the rancher that night.

Within his room he found a slip of paper attached to a stone, the latter having apparently been tossed in at the open window.

"Ten to one it is a demand for ransom-money from the Black Phenix!" he exclaimed.

But it was not. The paper was covered with writing, but the letters were shaky and uncertain, as if made by a very old person. It was with great difficulty the rancher deciphered the following:

"CYRUS ROBINSON:—

"The Yellow Witch is back. She can reveal the past and look into the future. Come to her *at once*. Come alone, and she will tell you of your child."

"OLD MAG."

For a long time Cy Robinson sat with the paper in his hand, staring steadily at the straggling and ill-shaped letters, his face wearing a look of uncertainty. He seemed like a man puzzling over an intricate problem.

At length he sprung up and began pacing the floor, crushing the paper in his hand.

"So Old Mag is back," he muttered. "At least, the paper says so, but, what am I to think of it? Has the Yellow Witch really returned to her hut in the hills, or is this a trick of some kind? By gracious! I remember hearing one of the men speak of seeing a smoke rising from her chimney. I reckon she is really back again."

"There is a mystery about that old woman—a mystery no one has been able to solve. Why she should occupy that lonely hut, and how she manages to live, is the mystery. Twice before this has she disappeared, only to return after a time. Where she goes or why she goes no one can say. There is no doubt but she is a crazy woman, but I know she is perfectly harmless."

For several minutes he strode back and forth in silence, but he soon broke out again.

"This may be a trick—a snare to entrap me. It is possible this slip of paper never came from the old fortune-teller. Let me look at it again. I have seen the old woman's writing once before."

He again carefully examined the paper and what was written on it.

"I believe the writing is the same as that I saw before. I do not believe in these foolish old fortune-tellers; and yet, Old Mag once told Nina some things about the past which I thought were only known to me and one other—and that other is dead. How she knew of those things I cannot imagine. She nearly frightened Nina to death with the story, but I deceived the child by assuring her it was all false. I would not have her know the truth—the bitter black truth—for the world! I have hoped the past was dead and buried."

"If I really thought this old witch could tell me anything of my child, I would not sleep till I had seen her. It is a good twenty miles, but with a fresh horse, I could get there, hear what she had to tell and return before morning."

"I believe I will go!"

He could not shake off the sudden desire which seized upon him.

"If it is a trap, I walk into it with a revolver in my hand. I do not fear one old woman."

He soon stole cautiously down the stairs and

left the building. As he approached the stable, some of the dogs came growling toward him, but he silenced them with a low word. The cowboy on guard called out to him, and he made himself known.

"Great Scott, boss!" exclaimed the fellow, in astonishment. "You oughter be snoozin' ef you're goin' ter hump roun' ter-morrer."

"I can't sleep, Skidds. I am going to take a little ride. Saddle the black stallion for me."

The cowboy nearly fell over in his amazement, and then, muttering something about some people being "mighty fond of ridin'," he hastened to obey his employer's orders.

As Cy Robinson stood with his hand on the bit of the fiery stallion, ready to spring into the saddle, he said:

"If I am not back by sunrise, Skidds, you may tell the boys I started for the cabin of the Yellow Witch."

Then he swung into the saddle and gave the stallion free rein, quickly vanishing from the amazed cowboy's eyes, being swallowed up in the darkness of a cloudy night.

CHAPTER XV.

THE YELLOW WITCH.

In a cabin amid the hills an old woman crouched silently beside a fire, over which was suspended a small kettle from which came a musical bubbling. The cabin door was flung wide open and the light of the fire flickered out into the night.

"Will he come?"

It was the old woman who muttered the words, as through the mass of tangled white hair that fell down over her face she peered toward the open doorway. Scarcely a glimpse of her face could be obtained, all because of that repulsive veil of tangled hair. Her clothes were soiled and ragged and her whole aspect that of abject poverty.

It was the mysterious "Yellow Witch" of the hills.

Afar in the night sounded a hoof-beat. The woman started and listened, then a laugh of exultation came from behind the veil of hair.

"He is coming!"

Upon the fire she flung a handful of powder which caused the flames to assume mingled tints of red, green and yellow, filling the small room with a weirdly fantastic light and making the old witch seem like a thing of evil as she still crouched beside the fire-place and began to croon a mournful chant.

The sounds of hoof-beats came nearer, nearer, nearer—then stopped at the door.

A few seconds later, Cy Robinson walked into the room, his hand on the butt of a holstered revolver. With a low exclamation, he halted and stared at the strange figure cut by the old woman as she was revealed by strange-colored light from the flames. She seemed to heed not his advent, for she did not stir or look up, but continued that weird crooning.

A feeling of repulsion seized upon the ranchman, but he was not a man to be shaken by a little trickery, so he spoke:

"Well, Mag, I am here."

Still the woman refused to stir or look up; still that mournful crooning continued.

With two strides, Cy Robinson was at her side, and his hand fell on her shoulder.

"You sent for me, Mag; I am here."

Then she started and looked up.

"I knew you would come," she croaked—"I knew it!"

"Well, now I am here, what have you to tell me? I have no time to waste, for I have not slept a wink in nearly forty-eight hours."

"What do you want to know, Cyrus Robinson?" harshly demanded the old crone.

"You said you could tell me of my child."

"And you have come to hear what I can tell?"

"For what other purpose would I take such a ride through the night, old woman?" came impatiently from the rancher's lips.

"And do you believe Old Mag can tell you anything of value?"

"Had I not thought it possible, do you think I would have taken this ride through the darkness after a day in the saddle?"

"But you have not a particle of faith in fortune-tellers, Cyrus Robinson—at least, you have repeatedly said so. You told your child Old Mag lied when she revealed some of your past history to the girl. Do you deny that, Cyrus Robinson?"

"I have no time to deny anything," and the ranchman's face grew black at hearing the past spoken of by the strange woman of the hills.

Old Mag lifted one yellow hand and shook it at him, crying:

"You know I told the girl the truth—you

know it, you know it! But I did not tell her one-half!"

"I have not come here to listen to your pratings of the past, old woman! If you can tell me anything of my child, tell it, and I promise you that you shall not go unrewarded."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Yellow Witch.

"You will reward me—you will reward Old Mag, eh? I wonder how much you will give her if she will tell you where you can find your child—I wonder, I wonder!"

"Give!" came hoarsely from the man's lips—"I will give enough to make you comfortable the rest of your life, old woman! Speak up! If you know anything, tell it!"

"What if the girl is dead?"

The ranchman reeled back a step, then sprang forward and clutched the crone by the shoulder, almost snarling:

"Don't fool with me, Mag! I will not stand it! Nina is not dead!"

The witch laughed sneeringly, and Cy Robinson saw a pair of coal-black eyes which gleamed through the mass of hair which fell down over them—gleamed like the eyes of a serpent. Something tempted him to brush that veil aside and get a fair look at the face behind it, but he resisted the desire. It would have been better for him, perhaps, had he obeyed the impulse.

"I have not said the girl is dead," croaked Mag. "I only asked that to discover how you would stand the revelation I am about to make. Oh, it is a strange revelation, Cyrus Robinson—a revelation that will freeze your blood with horror!"

"I do not care to listen to any of your wild tales, old woman; I did not come here for that purpose."

"If I am going to tell you anything, you will have to let me tell it in my own way. And I can tell of the present and the future only after I have told of the past. Sit down in that chair, Cyrus Robinson; sit down and listen."

He hesitated a moment, then obeyed.

The fire had assumed its natural state, the tints of green and yellow having disappeared. The witch arose and threw a handful of something into the bubbling pot, and in an instant a sound like a whispering of many lips came from the vessel. The old woman bent her head and listened with her ear close to the kettle. Till the whispering sounds had quite ceased she remained thus, then she turned toward Cy Robinson, laughing shrilly.

"Oh, it is a jolly tale the spirits have told me!" she declared, bobbing her bent body up and down—"a jolly tale! And it is true—it is true, for I have listened to it many times before. I am going to tell you what the spirits revealed to me, Cyrus Robinson."

"Many years ago there were two beautiful Spanish girls who fell in love with an American adventurer. The girls were twins and looked so much alike that their own friends and relatives were sometimes bothered in telling one from the other. One's hair was a trifle lighter than the other's, and that was the principal distinguishing feature about them. The one of the light hair was named Inez and the other Juanita."

"Now these two girls were living with their parents in Old Mexico when they first saw the American adventurer and fell in love with him. Naturally, their parents opposed their becoming friendly with the American, but both of the twins were wildly infatuated, and they would not listen to reason. There were secret meetings at most of which both maidens were present, and it was difficult to tell which the American preferred. In truth, he was undecided on this point himself."

"The rivalry between the girls was of the most sisterly nature, and each assured the other she would hold no hardness if she was unsuccessful and her sister won the American. Each protected the other from discovery in any secret interview indulged in with the adventurer."

"Inez of the light hair was the successful one in the end, for to her the American avowed his love. But, when she told her sister, there was a tempest, for to that moment Juanita had felt confident of winning in the end. Then Juanita broke her pledge and revealed everything to her parents. The storm of wrath that followed was terrific, and Inez was confined to her room, while the father watched for the daring American, swearing he would shoot the dog. But, Juanita still loved the adventurer, and she managed to warn him of his danger."

"This American was a most daring and clever fellow. How he conveyed intelligence of his plans to Inez no one ever knew, but one night she escaped from her room and fled with the waiting adventurer into the United States. There—"

"There, that is quite enough!" exclaimed the ranchman. "What do you suppose I care about this fairy-tale of love and adventure! I have not the time to waste in listening, and I did not come here for that purpose. If you can tell me anything of my child, tell it at once, and I will depart."

"I told you I could only reveal the present and future by speaking of the past. Have patience a little and I will come to the part that will interest and astound you. I will tell you something of your child that never entered your wildest dreams. Have patience, Cyrus Robinson, have patience!"

"Of course Inez's father and mother were fearfully angry, nor was Juanita any the less enraged. They all declared Inez was nothing to them from that moment; she had cast her lot with the American, and she might stay with him. They would have nothing to do with her."

"Inez was happy with her husband, even though his worldly wealth was small and he proved an adventurer indeed. He was well-educated, and after a time, the wife discovered that her poor knowledge of English and imperfect pronunciation of the language were unpleasant to him. Then she set about mastering the tongue of the man she loved, and she succeeded so well that in a remarkably short time she could speak and write correctly in his language."

"But, as I said, the man was an adventurer. He was engaged in all manner of wild schemes. One of these finally took him to South America, and he was forced to leave his beautiful wife behind, although it nearly broke her heart to part from him."

"Now it happened that Juanita still loved the husband of her sister and she sometimes dreamed of winning him from Inez. At first she considered them nothing but dreams, but gradually the desire to test her power grew upon her, and the sudden death of both of her parents left her plenty of money and opportunity to follow her inclinations. As a result, she traced her sister into the United States and finally found her. Juanita pretended to be very sorry for having treated Inez as she did in the past, and the lonely wife was only too glad to accept her sister as a friend and companion in her husband's absence. Just then she did not know her husband's address, and thus she was prevented from informing him of the reconciliation."

"Shortly after this reconciliation the young wife became a mother. And now comes astonishing number one for you, Cyrus Robinson. Listen!"

"The mother lived less than two hours after the child was born!"

For a moment the ranchman seemed dazed, then he cried:

"Old woman, you lie!"

CHAPTER XVI.

OLD MAG'S REVELATIONS.

THE Yellow Witch laughed shrilly.

"Oh, I lie, do I, Cyrus Robinson? I am a fool, am I, Cyrus Robinson? What would be my object in telling you anything but the truth, man?"

"I do not know your object, but I do know what you have just stated is false. Inez was living when I returned from South America."

"Ha, ha, ha! What a fool you were, Cyrus! Oh, what a blind fool you were! And where is Inez now?"

"She is dead—thank God!"

"Why do you thank God for that?"

"Because she was false—false as hell!"

"And now you are the one who lies, Cyrus Robinson! As there is a Heaven above us, Inez was true to you—you, the adventurer of my revelation!"

"Bah! Why do you tell me this? My own eyes witnessed her guilt; my own hand struck at the life of her lover! That he escaped death then, only to perish afterward, as he justly deserved, was not my fault. That Inez, whom I spared, killed herself at his death, I know. I have stood beside her grave."

"But, you saw not her dead body. Oh, how you have been deceived, Cyrus Robinson! But listen; I will go on with the revelations."

"Stop! I will hear no more of your foolish tales!"

"Oh, yes you will, Cyrus—yes, you will! I am not half done, and you must listen if you would know the fate of your child. Your child! Ha, ha, ha! You love your child! I wonder how it will be when you learn the truth. Sit still and listen, Cyrus!"

She put up her yellow hands and pushed them out toward him. He felt as if they had touched him and crushed him down into the seat. He

fell back helplessly, glaring at her, his lips moving, but no sound issuing from them.

"I tell you Inez died less than two hours after the birth of her child," Old Mag continued. "But the fact was kept a secret. Only the physician knew of it, and his tongue was silenced with a golden gag. She was secretly buried under the direction of the sister who had resolved on playing a most desperate game. Then that sister assumed the mother's place, the only thing necessary for the deceit being a slight change in the color of her hair, which was skillfully bleached to resemble that of her dead sister. Oh, it was a bold and crafty scheme, Cyrus Robinson—the scheme of a woman who was ready to pawn her very soul for the man whom she fancied she loved!

"But, Juanita could not talk English fluently, like her sister had been able to do. Her first thought was of that; she must speak as perfectly as Inez, and then she would be ready to meet you when you returned from South America. She immediately began to study, and her progress was something astonishing even to herself. But, before she had mastered English sufficiently to write as correctly as her sister, a letter came from the one whom she was plotting to win. At first she was puzzled to know what to do, but she soon saw a way out of it. She got a friend to answer the letter, pretending to be too sick to write herself just then, but wishing to make an immediate reply to let him know of the birth of the child. The letter told him it was a dear little girl; but the letter lied, Cyrus Robinson!

"The child to which Inez gave birth was a boy!"

A harsh laugh came from the ranchman's lips, and he hoarsely cried:

"Now I know you lie, old woman! You are deranged! I did not come here to listen to the wild tales of a crazy witch, and I have no more time to spend in such a foolish manner!"

"Go if you want to, then!" snarled Old Mag, shaking her clinched hands at him. "Go, go, go! but never again will you look on the face of the one whom you have believed your child all these years! Old Mag swears it!"

The rancher had partially started up, but he sunk back into his seat again, his face turning pale and a light of dread filling his sunken eyes.

"Why don't you go?" sneered the Yellow Witch. "What is hindering you, Cyrus? The door is wide open."

"Go on with your yarn!" came hoarsely from the man's lips. "I will remain and see how big a lie you can tell."

Old Mag chuckled with satisfaction.

"I knew you would," she asserted—"I knew it! But, you may get frightened and run out at the door when I tell you all the truth, so I will close it. It shall not be fastened, Cyrus, but I will close it."

She swung the door shut, then came back and crouched beside the fire, beginning to mutter and mumble and nod in a strange fashion. This she continued several moments; then she threw another powder into the flames, and almost immediately a soft and delightful perfume filled the room. It was exquisite to the senses, but it was like some powerful drug that steals away one's power of motion, but leaves his mind clear to understand.

Cy Robinson felt the influence of the subtle perfume stealing over him, and he sought to bestir himself and rush from the hut; but even then he only succeeded in partially starting from his seat and falling back helplessly.

Shrilly laughing, Old Mag approached.

"Isn't it sweet, Cyrus; isn't it delightful? Had it entered your nostrils as many times as it has mine, it would have no effect upon you—no more effect than it has on me. Now I have no fear that you will run away before I can tell you the whole truth—the astounding truth. You will remain quiet and listen. I will go on."

"Juanita, the bold, when she resolved to take her sister's place as your wife, fully realized the possibility of failure. She was a strange creature, and even while she believed she loved you, she thought it possible that love would turn to hate if you should discover the deception and cast her off. Then she would wish to have some hold on you by which she could crush you. A wild scheme entered her brain, and she resolved to carry it out. Children of any sort can be purchased by money in a great city, and Juanita, through an agent, bought a pretty baby girl, taking care the heartless mother who sold it knew not whither it went. Then the boy, her dead sister's child, she placed in the hands of people who would care for it for a consideration. The girl took its place.

"This seems strange and improbable to you,

Cyrus Robinson, but it is the truth. You are tortured by what you hear, but you have not heard the worst. I will go on.

"Just before you returned from South America, Juanita, who was then known as Inez, became acquainted with a young fellow in whose company she managed to pass many very pleasant hours. Still she believed she loved you. She was only whiling away the time till you came. But the young man fell madly in love with the Spanish beauty, vainly trying to induce her to give up her supposed husband and fly with him. She refused.

"You came back from the South, and she received you as your wife. You never detected the cheat; you never dreamed of the change. You held her in your strong arms, and covered her mouth with kisses; you kissed the babe and believed it your own child. The deception was perfect and the false Inez was happy for a time.

"But years had changed you, Cyrus. After a time the new Inez began to feel as if something was lacking in you—something she could not understand. Then she turned to herself for an explanation, and found it was something lacking in her own heart. She did not truly love you as she had imagined! This horrible discovery came to her one day and crushed her like a flower that has been trampled on. For a long time she was so sad, so strange, so unlike herself that you wondered and could not understand her mood. Nothing would cheer her. She had plotted and deceived only to be bitterly disappointed.

"All this while her other lover was waiting and watching, refusing to give up hope. Once they met by accident; after that their meetings were frequent and stealthy. But, you were keen, Cyrus; you detected something wrong about the woman you believed your wife, and you watched her closely. As a result, you caught her in her lover's arms—in the arms of the man she did truly love!

"You know what followed, Cyrus; you shot him down before her eyes and left him for dead. But, he did not die. Juanita nursed him back to life. She swore to kill you if he died, but to cause you to suffer the tortures of a thousand deaths before you were relieved by death itself. She learned you had disappeared, taking with you the child you believed your own. She laughed as she thought of striking at you through the boy who was your child in truth. This child she now took into her own charge, giving it the name of Pablo.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the witch, as she rubbed her yellow hands together. "It is a pretty story, Cyrus—a pretty story! What a fool you were—what a fool you have been all these years! You have brought up a nameless wail, while your own child has learned to call Juanita mother. But the story:

"Juanita nursed her lover back to life, only to have him slain by the dogs of the law. He had committed some small crime, and he tried to escape when they would have arrested him. He was shot and killed.

"Juanita brooded over his death—it nearly killed her. Somehow it seemed to her as if you were responsible for it all, Cyrus Robinson, and she resolved to strike at you. To aid in this, she made a pretense of poisoning herself, and was supposed to have been buried in the grave beside which you stood. She died as Inez; far away, she appeared as Juanita, and Little Pablo was with her.

"For years she has known where you were, Cyrus Robinson; she has kept track of your every move. If she sought revenge, why didn't she strike? Ah, she was not ready, Cyrus! Something held her back for the time. She would strike at you through your own child when the right time came. The time has come! Listen, Cyrus Robinson:

"Your own son—your Pablo—is the outlaw known as the Black Phenix!"

A gasping groan came from the lips of the astonished rancher. He struggled madly to throw off the lethargy that held him helpless. He tried to shout—to curse. All in vain! Great drops of perspiration stood on his forehead; white foam flecked his lips.

Shrilly Old Mag's laugh sounded through the cabin. The witch suddenly straightened up and was no longer the bent old woman. Again she threw a handful of powder on the fire, and immediately a dense smoke began to roll into the room—a smoke with a perfume that was both sweet and sickening. It gathered around her in dense masses, and, as if on a buoyant wave, she seemed to float toward the ranchman. Before him she appeared to pause, poised in the air. He knew it must be an illusion.

"Now comes the final revelation, Cyrus Rob-

inson," cried the Witch of the Hills. "Look, look, look!"

She threw aside the ragged garment that had enveloped her, and her attire was whole and clean beneath; she tore aside the veil of matted hair and cast it from her, and a hard, cruel, yet fascinatingly beautiful face was revealed! Not the face of a girl, but the face of a handsome woman of middle age!

This seemed to break the spell which had chained the man's tongue, for he gasped:

"Inez—my God!"

"No, not Inez," was the reply. "I am Juanita!"

Then the strange perfume of the smoke stole away the man's senses, and he sunk unconscious before her.

CHAPTER XVII.

INTO THE CAVERN.

THROUGH a chink in the cabin wall a man had been watching all that transpired within. And that man was Rodney Welland—"Old Rattlebrain." Strangely enough, the deranged man had gradually come back to his right mind and was in a normal condition as he witnessed the strange things occurring within the hut of the Yellow Witch.

When Cy Robinson lay unconscious before her, a hard laugh came from the lips of the woman. Then she turned and threw open the cabin door, muttering something about fresh air.

As the cool night air cleared away the smoke which had filled the room, Rodney Welland saw the woman pushing the coals and fire-brands far back into the fireplace. Then she stamped three times upon a certain portion of the floor.

Several moments passed, then a flat stone which formed a part of the bottom of the fireplace sunk from view, revealing a dark opening through which two hooded figures arose into the hut. The woman motioned toward the unconscious man. They lifted him, and he was lowered through the opening, after which they disappeared and the flat stone once more rose into view.

The man outside the cabin waited to see no more. Silently he stole to where the ranchman's horse was still standing, to fling himself into the saddle and go thundering into the darkness of the night.

The woman of the hills rushed to the open cabin door, but was too late to catch a glimpse of horse or rider.

"I wonder what could have startled the animal?" she muttered. And she did not dream a rider was mounted on its back.

By rare good fortune rather than by reason, Rodney Welland struck straight toward the ranch. Still there may have been something like instinct about the choosing of the course, for he gave the black stallion free rein.

For twenty miles the horse had been ridden at its highest speed that night, but Rodney Welland was almost merciless in urging him onward as the return trip was made.

Morning was at hand and a gray light was beginning to show in the east when Robinson Ranch was reached.

Welland lost not a moment's time in arousing the place and telling his surprising story. At first it was thought to be the imagining of a disordered brain, but when Cy Robinson was not found in his room and the cowboy Skids declared that he had started for the hut of the Yellow Witch, then there was excitement indeed.

"Saddle up, pards, saddle up!" shouted Round-up Rube. "Thar's er hard ride an' hot work afore us! We've got ter bump ourselves ef we want ter save ther boss, fer I reckon them critters 'll be arter snuffin' him out putty soon. Ther gals are thar too. Stir yer stumps, lads!"

"Bress de Good Lawd!" squealed Pete. "I's jes' gwine 'long wid dis congregatherin', I is! Ef yo' 'll give dis chile a gun he'll show ye how ter make sassage-meat ob dem gal-catchers! Oh, wow! won't it be a reglum picnic! An' I'll see lit'l missy! Well, I's jes' is gwine 'long wid yo' folkses, an' I'll butt de win' out ob de onery coon dat say I isn't."

"You will have to rustle for a horse, if you want to go, Pete," said Chris. "There will not be any of the boys who will stop to get one ready for you."

"Well, I's er rustler, I is! If yo' leabe dis chile behin' jes' yo' tell him he's a fool-niggah."

In a few minutes all the cowboys, with a single exception, were ready for the ride. One of the men was forced to remain behind and look after the place, but he swore roundly at his fate.

Away toward the hills rode the cowboys, one of their number making a sweep to take in the Diamond Ranch and secure reinforcements from Orson Colfax's men. But the rest of the party

did not wait for the cowboys of the Tenderfoot Rancher to join them.

With Rube, Chris, Fred, and Rodney Welland at their head, they dashed straight on for the hills, heading for the hut of the witch.

The twenty miles were covered in a remarkably short space of time, and the party drew up at Old Mag's cabin. Leaping from the saddles and leaving the horses hitched to the small timber about, they hurried into the hut.

A fire was still burning upon the hearth, and the Yellow Witch was crouching beside it, mumbling to herself. She seemed to pay no heed to the entrance of the men, but her surprise must have been great when she was seized and the mass of false hair torn from her head.

"Stiddy, you!" snarled Round-up Rube, as the unmasked woman squirmed and raved in Rodney Welland's powerful grasp. "We mean business, and hain't got no time to lose. We know your crooked game from beginning to end. Where is Cy Robinson?"

"What do I know of Cy Robinson?" she cried. "He kem hyer—"

"Yes; he came here in the night, and he departed as he came—upon the back of his horse."

"Hang ter ther lyin' hussy!" exclaimed Rube. "Some o' you fellers tie her up tight an' let Welland see ef he kin tell how thet stun works. He saw it move, an' he oughter know suthin' 'bout it."

Juanita fought savagely, but her efforts were useless. In a few moments she was securely bound.

Meantime the men had been working around the movable stone, but for a long time their investigations came to naught. It was left for Fred Anthrop to discover the secret spring by which it could be operated from within the cabin.

As the stone sunk from view, the men peered into the opening and saw a dark flight of stairs.

"Lights, pards, lights!" exclaimed the foreman.

There was a pile of wood in one corner of the hut, and from it several knots were selected and lighted.

"Now foller me with yer barkers in yer han's," ordered the bow-legged cowboy, as he dauntlessly descended into the darkness.

Welland followed next, then Fred and Chris, after which the cowboys filed in as happened to fall their lot, Pete bringing up the rear, a huge horse-pistol he had somehow secured clasped in his black hand and desperate determination written on his face.

They had not taken the precaution to gag the woman, and she set up a wild shrieking as they descended.

"Kem on!" gritted Rube. "Ef thet don't roust ther critters up, I dunnother reason why!"

Every moment they expected to hear an alarm, but they reached the cavern-bottom without any disturbance being created. This filled them with wonder, and a fear seized upon them, lest the robbers had taken the alarm and fled from the cave by means of another exit.

Forward they hurried, and suddenly their lights showed them four flitting figures which seemed trying to escape observation.

"Halt thar!" howled Round-up Rube. "Stan' stiddy, ur we'll riddle ye!"

One of the figures uttered an exclamation of surprise and joy.

"It's Rube!" cried the voice of Cy Robinson—"Rube and the boys!"

Then the torchlight revealed the surprising fact that two of the figures were the very girls for whom they had searched! A third was Cy Robinson, free and unfettered, while the fourth appeared to be a hooded outlaw.

In another moment Rodney Welland had clasped his child in his arms, while Pete, the darky, was dancing and shouting with delight and the astounded cowboys were looking around in vain for signs of the many outlaws they had expected to encounter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FINAL CLEARING-UP.

"BLESS my eyes!" cried Old Rube: "Whar are ther pesky cattle-lifters? I don't see but one o' 'em, an' he seems kinder peaceable like. His clothes are all slashed like he'd bin run through er thrasher, an' he's bleedin', too!"

It was true the hooded man's garments were cut here and there and spotted with blood in places.

"To this unknown I owe my life," explained Cy Robinson. "But for him you would have found plenty of outlaws to contest your way. Black Phenix himself would have been with them. Over my capture they held a perfect carousal, and the chief fully intended to

kill me; but this unknown friend managed to drug the liquor which all save the leader were drinking, and they were overcome by the stuff. Then he met the chief hand to hand, and they fought with knives. The result is plain. Our benefactor is here; the chief lies dead back there with a knife in his throat. All the other outlaws we have bound hand and foot. They are still unconscious from the drug."

A shout of delight came from the cowboys, and they crowded around the hooded man, eagerly shaking his hands.

"You're a Jim-dandy, pard, ef you wuz one o' ther cussid ban!" cried Rube.

"But I was *not* one of the band," was the assertion. "I found my way into the cave by the entrance often used to admit stolen cattle. Once inside, I succeeded in knocking over one of the outlaws and assuming his part, his clothes and hood fully disguising me. I have been more successful than I dared hope possible, for I have destroyed the wretch who ruined my sister and caused her death. That dastardly work has kept me on the trail of the Black Phenix for the last two years. Now my work of vengeance is completed."

"Wal, you're er hustler, pard. But, I reckon you don't need thet head-dress no longer. Jest yank it off an' let us git a look at yer phiz."

The man removed the hood, and a shout of amazement came from the cowboys as they saw his face revealed by the torchlight.

It was Pablo Pajarito!

"Wal, may I be ding-blasted!" gasped Round-up Rube. "It is ther Greaser! Then who in thunder wuz ther Black Phenix?"

Pablo laughed, shortly.

"Follow me and you shall see," he said.

He led the way back into a wing of the cavern where the outlaws were lying about on the floor in various positions, all sleeping soundly from the effect of the drug and all secured, hands and feet.

Stepping over the prostrate forms, the Mexican led the way to where one rigid figure lay with his white face upturned to the black roof of the cave, his eyes wide open but forever sightless, the haft of a knife rising above his throat. In his rigid hand was clasped another knife.

"Here he is, senors," fell from Pablo's lips; "here is the man who destroyed my sister! He had an equal chance with me, but my knife found his throat. Pepita is avenged!"

"Holy smoke!" shouted Round-up Rube. "It is Orson Colfax!"

And the Tenderfoot Rancher it truly was, although the cowboys could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes.

"When he met my sister in Mexico," explained the avenger, "he was known as Pablo Fernandez. Orson Colfax was simply one of his many false names. I suspected Colfax was the Black Phenix, and for that reason I hired with him. He played his part skillfully, and I do not think more than one or two of his cowboys suspected he was the Scourge."

Cy Robinson turned away, sick at heart, and walked toward the girls and the two young men, Chris and Fred, who, with Pete, the darky, had not entered the wing of the cavern where lay the unconscious outlaws and their dead chief.

"My God!" muttered the rancher. "Can it be that woman told the truth?—can it be that that wretch back there was my own son? Even if it is so, I am glad he is dead! The world is well rid of such a curse."

They did not wait for the cowboys, but Chris led the way out of the cave, returning to the open air by means of the steps which led up into the cabin of the woman who had been known as the Yellow Witch. She was still lying bound and helpless, and when they appeared, she rent the air with her imprecations. Chris hurried the young women out of the hut, and a party of cowboys from the Diamond Ranch met them at the door.

"Hyar we are!" cried the leader. "It looks like we wuz too late, but we kem fast as critters c'd u'd kerry us. Boss wuz too bruck up ter come; hain't bin outer his room sence yistiddy."

"Who is attending your boss?" asked Cy Robinson.

"Jack Kipper, sir."

"Well, when you return, take my advice and hang Jack Kipper up to dry with a rope round his neck. If you want to know what I mean, just go in there, slide down those stairs and follow your noses till you come to where my men are. They will show you something worth looking at."

When the cowboys had entered the cave, the ranchman went back into the hut.

Crouching beside the woman who had so deceived him in the past, Cy Robinson told her

of the death of the Black Phenix and the wreck of her schemes for revenge. But the woman would not believe the chief was dead.

"Pablo—my Pablo dead?" she cried. "Bah! you are trying to deceive me, Cyrus Robinson!"

"I am telling you the solemn truth," he assured. "Your Pablo—the one your lying tongue tried to make me believe was my son—is dead."

"Dead!" she gasped, seeming dazed. "He was so young—barely twenty. And still he had made such a name, with my aid!"

"Only twenty?" questioned the man. "Why, as Orson Colfax, he looked twenty-five, at least! Was he only twenty?"

"That is all," came mechanically from her lips.

"Then you lied to me, woman!" cried the rancher, sternly. "If he were my child, he would be *twenty-one*. That is the age of my daughter."

The cowboys now appeared bearing the body of the dead chief. When she saw the silent chief, the woman burst into tears, sobbing:

"Oh, my boy, my own boy! Dead, dead, dead!"

"You have now fully betrayed yourself," came coldly from Cy Robinson. "This was indeed your own son and not mine. Tell me one thing, then your hands shall be released. Who was his father?"

"The man whom you believed you killed—my lover."

"That is enough," added the rancher. "Release her, boys!"

"We have one favor ter ax fu'st, boss," said Round-up Rube.

"What is it?"

"Ther privilege of playin' Jedge Lynch with them critters down below."

"Treat them as you think their acts merit."

As Cy Robinson, the negro, Rodney Welland and the young people were riding with their backs toward the hills, a strange tribunal was held in the underground chamber. Never again did Black Phenix's band of cattle-lifters trouble the Valley of the San Juan. The Scourge had been scourged and the peace of a happy and prosperous region was unbroken.

Perhaps there are one or two points requiring explanation.

It will be remembered that on the night of Nellie Welland's abduction the Black Phenix appeared outside the Robinson Ranch while Orson Colfax was with those who were searching for the missing girl. In that instance, as well as at various other times, the character of the chief was assumed by the mother! An undergarment of finely-woven steel links protected Black Phenix many times from the bullets of his enemies and made him seem quite invulnerable. This was worn by the woman at the time of her appearance at the ranch.

Pablo Pajarito had suspected the presence of this protection, and had buried his knife in his enemy's throat instead of striking at his heart.

Pablo it was who fired Colfax's buildings. A locket, which he wore over his heart, and which contained a picture of his dead sister, had stopped Colfax's bullet, and thus aided in making the cowboys believe Pablo was truly the invulnerable Black Phenix.

Whisky Jim and Nevada Mike met a just doom with the rest of the outlaws; but Jack Kipper took the alarm and escaped.

Juanita Fernandez, the evil genius of it all, also disappeared.

There was another night of merrymaking at the Robinson Ranch, and Pete fairly "knocked de stuffin'" out of his banjo, answering every call for a song, and putting so much vigor into his singing, that, as he afterward remarked, his voice on the following day was all "kerbusted out ob j'int." Pablo Pajarito was a guest on that occasion, and even Old Rube acknowledged he was "quite er cuss fer a Greaser," which was a great admission for the cowboy to make.

The marriage of Fred and Nell was not long delayed. Then they settled down on the Diamond Ranch, which had been purchased by Cy Robinson, the amount paid being justly divided among those of the San Juan Valley who had suffered loss at the hands of the cattle-lifters. Fred was given all the time he wished in which to lift the "non-interest paying" mortgage upon the place!

Rodney Welland made his home with them; and Pete became one of the fixtures of the place, of course.

And Chris?

Well, Chris sometimes declared he did not think he would ever marry; but Nell secretly encouraged Nina by saying there was plenty of time for him to change his mind.

THE END.

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- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
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- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 226 The Arab Detective; or, Snoozer, the Boy Sharp.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
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- 348 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Detective.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabdice, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
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- 467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 524 The Engineer Detective; or, Redlight Ralph's Resolve.
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer; or, The Double Case.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton; or, Running the Rascals Out.
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